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# Transnational Protests and the Media

EDITED BY Simon Cottle & Libby Lester

# Open Source Protest: Human Rights, Online Activism and the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games

By

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In a pre-Internet era, politicians, social movements and activist groups relied heavily on the mass media to amplify their messages. The Internet promised a new era of independent media with the potential to revolutionize the social and political world by redistributing the means of communication towards the masses, rather than the media monopolies. Its advantage would be to enable direct, two-way interaction between senders and receivers unmotivated by the drive to boost audience figures. For this reason, such authors as Grossman (1995) argued that the Internet could launch a third great era of democracy. As indication of this, today's social movements and activist groups, as seen in the cases of Wikileaks<sup>1</sup>, the Moldova Twitter Revolution<sup>2</sup>, the Iranian Elections<sup>3</sup>, and the Copenhagen environmental protests<sup>4,5</sup> (Hodge, 2009; Parr, 2009) have utilized digital technology to bypass mainstream media channels both in accessing and distributing information (Russel, 2005). Yet, there is also considerable evidence to suggest that activist groups are very capable of getting their messages into mass media channels *as well* (Bennet, 2003; Cammaerts 2008a, 2008b). As such, if the Internet can help activist groups and social movements circumvent traditional media, as well as gain its attention, then perhaps McCaughey and Ayers' (2003) are right when claiming that more attention should be given to the Internet as a medium that is inextricable from *processes* of social change rather than just as a device to *provoke* discussions about change.

A prominent and recurrent platform where such transformative forces are apparent is the Olympic Games. Beyond being the biggest sports events in the world, the Olympic Games is frequently used as a platform where geopolitical and geo-commercial issues are played out by competing discourses between brand owners, media outlets, politicians and the public. We argue that recent Olympic Games demonstrate these mixed processes of media change, where both the largest gatherings of traditional media and independent media operate. In particular, we argue that activism is an *intrinsic* part of the Olympic Games experience and, by this, we mean that it is inevitable, necessary and even valuable. Olympic activism is shaped by a variety of intersecting factors, including the size and location of the Games, the

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wikileaks.org/>

<sup>2</sup> On Twitter most of the messages related to Moldova were easily searchable due to the common accepted hashtag #pman

<sup>3</sup> Messages from Iran and in support of Iranian protesters sent during the Iran Elections were usually sent out with the #iranelection hashtag. This enabled easy searches, both live and post-event.

<sup>4</sup> <http://cop15.panda.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.timeforclimatejustice.org/>

geopolitical situation, and the local activist culture.

Using as a starting point McCaughey and Ayers' (2003) and Russel's (2005) arguments, according to which more attention should be given to the Internet as a medium that assists social change rather than provokes it, we discuss how international human rights advocacy groups, notably Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, coordinated their Internet presence to reach the mass media, members of the public, critics and supporters of the Games alike during the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. In making our case we provide examples of previous forms of protest in Olympic history, along with ethnographic data from Beijing 2008. We conclude that transnational activism, including Olympic-targeted activism, has entered a new stage to reveal a new wave of convergent media processes, characterized by integrated offline and online strategies. We also suggest that the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games confirms the need for social movements to receive media attention in order to further their causes and bring about social change. Thus, while online activism can help transcend local borders, it can be used both as an official medium to communicate information, as well as an alternative means through which to enable direct contact with members and supporters.

### **A brief history of Olympic protest**

It is commonplace to think of activism and protest as a modern phenomenon. However, in the context of the Olympic Games, there is evidence of similar kinds of activity in antiquity, some as early as 364BC. Then, Elian soldiers stormed the arena in Olympia in the middle of the most popular competition, wrestling, and started a battle against the Pisan organizers whom, according to Xenophon, had wrested the Games from the Elians, the traditional hosts. While the Elians lost the battle, their action secured the organization of the following Games (Perrottet, 2008). Even earlier, during 420 BC during the Peloponnesian War, Spartans were banned from the Games, although the sacred Olympic Truce working as a cease-fire, granting safe passage to athletes and spectators during Games time. Twenty years later, the Spartans broke the truce by mounting a military campaign (Perrottet, 2008).

These ancient forms of Olympic activism were acts of defending honor in military terms, unlike modern Olympic activism, which has been mostly ideologically driven. On this basis, modern Olympic history has been marked by several instances where countries, communities or individuals have articulated their political positions via sports competitions. For example, Spain's People's Olympics of 1936 organized by its newly elected Popular Front government, was a way of opposing Hitler's Olympics in Berlin (Walters, 2006). Alternatively, the boycotts of Tokyo 1964 and the Montreal 1976 Games directed against South Africa's apartheid segregated system applied in sport are just some examples of governments initiated actions in support of political causes. Similarly, the case of international television networks and cinema newsreel companies refusal "to pay royalties for the privilege of showing Olympic newsfilm on a delayed basis" (Wenn, 1993) during the Melbourne 1956 Games is the first to bring commercial, economic and ethical considerations under the same protest. On an individual athlete level, perhaps the most famous individual activism undertaken by Olympic athletes is the 'black power salute' delivered by USA athletes Tommie Smith, John Carlos and Peter Norman on the medals podium at the 1968 Mexico Games.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Few people remember the Olympic Project for Human Rights badge worn by Peter Norman, the third athlete on the podium with Smith and Carlos and the second place winner in their race. As well, often

Olympic activism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century utilized the Olympic Games as the locus of action – often by non-participation or boycott. In the 21st century, Olympic activism has thus far taken a different form, as boycotts are no longer considered effective by media, activists and think tanks (Schmemmann, 2008). Instead, calls for the IOC to assume greater responsibility have surfaced, as they have aligned themselves with transnational corporate interests. Such concerns encompass human rights, environmental responsibilities, cultural legacies and impact on local communities. Thus, interest groups rather than nations have become the primary mechanism of Olympic activism. For example, the issues raised on the approach to the Sydney 2000 Games were about the diminishing resources of low-cost housing linked with the recognition of aboriginal people's rights and media rights. Welfare groups threatened to set up a tent city to embarrass the authorities (ABC, 2000). Media activists set up their own media centre, the Sydney Independent Media Center, to counteract NBC's ban on uploading videos online before their airing in the USA (Lord, 2000).

At the Athens 2004 Games, a similar range of issues arose. Environmental and public space protection saw social resistance emerging at many different levels within the society (Portaliou, 2008). The intensive working conditions in the construction sector, with the effective abolition of limits to working hours, led to daily accidents and a subsequent Games times protest in Athens' central square, Syntagma, on behalf of the 23 workers who had lost their lives during the construction of venues.

### **Beijing – the precedent**

In the case of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, the Chinese organizers were under scrutiny as early as 1993, as the city first qualified to candidate status and ended up competing against Sydney for the Millennium Games. Some argued then that Beijing's loss at only two votes from Sydney was due to the international perception of China having a poor human rights record (Brownell, 2004, Ostbo Haugen, 2003).

Later, when Beijing's second bid was successful, the IOC's decision was subjected to various debates, such as those held by the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China (2003, 2008). Formal protests also took place. For example, the House Resolution introduced by US Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, the Ranking Member on the U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight, appealed to the government to boycott the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing ("Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the President should take immediate action to boycott the summer Olympic Games of 2008 in Beijing, China." 2007) being one of them. A similar call was also launched by the European Parliament to the European Union leaders (2008c, 2008a, 2007). Moreover, actress Mia Farrow and her son Ronan Farrow labelled the Beijing Games, the 'Genocide Olympics' on account of China's relationship with Darfur (Farrow, 2007). Furthermore, protests from pro-Tibet activists and Burmese supporters calling upon people to boycott the Games were also visible throughout the preparation period preceding the Olympics.

China's temporarily instituted media legislation to allow greater freedoms for foreign journalists, which was implemented in January 2007, was also interrogated due to its ineffectual consequences. Additionally, just months before the Olympic Games started, the international leg of the Torch Relay was subject to numerous

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forgotten are the black berets and salute of the winners of the 4x400 meter final, both gestures in sympathy and support of Smith and Carlos (Hartmann, 1996, Arbena, 2002). Alwyn Morris' eagle feather raised in recognition of his heritage while on the podium of the 1000-meter Canoe Sprint competition in 1984 in Los Angeles is also forgotten (Morris, 1999)

disruptions around the world. Part of the protests were sparked by China's reaction to the Tibetan uprising in March 2008, while others were triggered by more general concerns related to China's human rights record (Zizek, 2008, 2008b, Jacobs, 2008). Finally, just days before the Olympic Games began, discussions about Internet and media censorship were still taking place, due to foreign journalists not being able to get access to the sites they wanted to use.

Thus, human rights received a lot of attention around the Beijing Olympics, notably in relation to freedom of speech, labor rights and forced evictions (Liu, 2007). In this respect, human rights advocacy groups and their sustained campaigns have contributed the primary forms of activism around Beijing. Consistent and constant communication undertaken by these groups emphasized the presence of a link between the Olympic fundamental principles and larger human rights and humanitarian concerns. Yet, of particular interest to us is what these activities reveal about how activist groups use the Internet to promote their causes.

For example in July 2001, when Beijing won the rights to host the 2008 Games, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, two of the most renowned human rights advocacy groups released major materials such as reports or press releases each about China's human rights situation. Other mentions to China's situation were made in specific reports as well such as Amnesty International's News For Health Professionals or Human Rights Watch's take on UN's Program of Action on Small Arms. Both groups used the Internet to distribute their documentation globally and aggregate information from their national sites. Both groups capitalized on international attention generated by the announcement of the 2008 Games host. Each of them sent out warning messages about China's potential impact on the spirit and values of Olympism. For example, Amnesty International issues a press release when Beijing's bid which stated that "as host of the 2008 Olympic Games, China must improve its human rights situation and uphold principles enshrined in The Olympic Charter". In the same release, the group was suggesting that "the Chinese government must prove it is worthy of staging the Games (...) extending "respect for universal fundamental ethical principles" to the people of China" (Amnesty International, 2001).

Alternatively, Human Rights Watch released more Olympics oriented messages at key Olympic preparation landmarks. For example, on July 10 2001, an opinion piece was published in the International Herald Tribune (print and online) calling to the IOC to request human rights guarantees from future candidate cities (Jones, 2001b). On the day of the winner's announcement, Human Rights Watch published in the same news section of its website another article emphasizing the burden "on the International Olympic Committee and the Games' corporate sponsors to make the Games a force for change in China" (Jones, 2001a). Finally, a week after Beijing was the known winner of the 2008 Games, a broader material, called a backgrounder, was made available under the same section. The document described China's freedom of expression and its Internet policy, discussing rules and regulations in place and arguing that the two elements needed drastic improvements (HRW, 2001).



Figure 1. Amnesty International Website on July 11, 2001 from web.archive.org (December 9, 2009)

In 2001, the messages of both advocacy groups were thus similar: that China's human rights record makes it unfit to organize an Olympic Games. Both suggested that the International Olympic Committee would request human rights guarantees from Olympic hosts in the same way it requires financial and environmental guarantees (Adi & Miah, 2008). Each organization claimed that human rights were inadequately addressed by the Olympic Movement generally and the Chinese government specifically.

From this, one may conclude that the media was the advocacy groups' main target in 2001 and the Internet just a support, or just another medium to disseminate their messages. The transmission of information both online and offline followed the same model of communication from one to many. A dramatic change in the use of digital media by HRW and Amnesty is apparent from 2001 to 2008.

## Beijing and advocacy groups in 2008

The period from 2001 to 2008 marks a shift from using the Internet as a secondary tool for communication to a primary medium where activities are coordinated, protests are planned and high quality information is publicized. Additionally, the Internet noticeably becomes an alternative medium of communication as well, one that enables activist groups to get in contact with their target audiences in a cost-efficient manner.

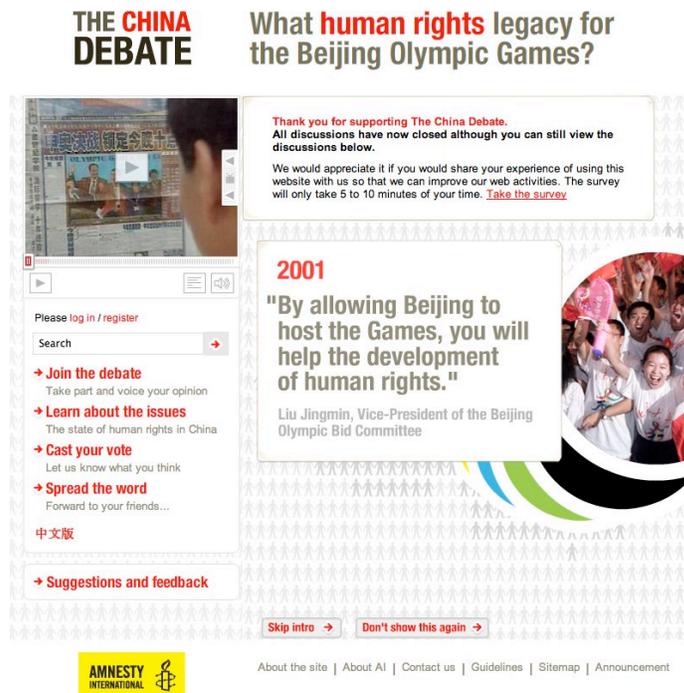


Figure 2. Screenshot of Amnesty International’s “The China Debate” website main page (December 9, 2009)

In 2008, Amnesty’s main website, [amnesty.org](http://amnesty.org), remained the major source of information for its members, supporters and media. Most of the China and the Olympics related content was uploaded under the news and updates area, where the public statements of the group were also published, as were their press releases and answer to articles published by traditional media outlets. However, for direct contact with the general public, a website dedicated to debating China and its human rights issues was launched. Hence, Amnesty’s use of the Internet in a discriminatory way allowed it to publish different content to different websites it owned and get reach other target audiences using the best fit mechanisms, such as free platforms delivering specialized services, to reach them. Moreover, having a differentiated communication strategy and multiple specialized presences online – such as the official website, campaign websites or a YouTube channel – Amnesty also created a better information distribution network relying on peer to peer transmission that transcended national borders.

The China Debate website was one such alternative, yet specialized, presence for Amnesty International, that aimed to promote dialogue and learn from the debates it initiated. As a web-presence requiring membership, Amnesty’s China Debate website aimed to create as well as enable dialogue around the four-color coded human rights issues: repression of activists (pink), detention without trial (black), censorship (blue) and death penalty (green), which the organization prioritized as central to “upholding the Olympic value ‘the preservation of human dignity’” (The China Debate). To these another ‘human rights legacy’ was added. The topic was coded with yellow and from the website reports results to be the most debated issue, its “A promising Olympics?” debate leading the online discussion. Other questions the debate addressed included “What is your view of the impact of the Olympics on human rights in China” and “How can the Chinese authorities deliver a lasting legacy for human rights”. They were viewed more than 20,000 times and received over 90

comments. Figure 3 shows the upper screen of the debate together with other related information and mechanisms of promotion suggested by Amnesty International, most often third-party websites known for their amplifying features: the social network Facebook, the social bookmarking websites Delicious, Digg and StumbleUpon, and the blogging search engine and blog popularity indexes provider Technorati. RSS (real simple syndication) updates and an email form entitled “Spread the Word” are also included within the “forwarding” features of the website.



Figure 3. A promising Olympics? debate part of the Human Rights Legacy talks on The China Debate dedicated website of Amnesty International (The China Debate)

These features emphasize Amnesty’s objectives for the campaign: raising awareness and create dialogue by amplifying the group’s messages. A similar goal was sought through its presence on the video sharing website, YouTube where the group currently has over 4,000 subscribers and registers more than 1 million total upload views since September 2006. In an online environment where interconnectivity is essential and viral effects are sought, the content sharing strategy adopted by Amnesty aims to reach dispersed audiences united by unlimited access to the Internet.

Finally, polls were also used to assess public opinion and provide the group with more research-based information to support their claims. However, the disadvantage of such polls comes from the lack of background information on users, such demographic data or whether there were repeat votes from the same computer or IP address. Figure 4 shows one of such surveys with its result.

### Should there be different regulations for Chinese and foreign journalists?

16% Yes  
84% No



Figure 4. Amnesty International poll on The China Debate website

Human Rights Watch adopted a similar strategy to create a separate, China dedicated space. The website [China.hrw.org](http://China.hrw.org) entitled *Beijing 2008. China's Olympian Human Rights Challenges* followed HRW's official website structure, thus creating a different approach from Amnesty's distinct looking website. Furthermore, HRW integrated information *sharing* with information *gathering* from online discussions, via its "join the discussion" section. This ensured coherence of information and responded to the information or dialogue needs that HRW's public might have. However, HRW's debate site is hosted by a link to a third-party: the Washington Post's Rights Watchers. This is a rather risky choice for a group that claims independence from other profit and non-profit, political and apolitical organizations and groups. Moreover, it has the potential to affiliate it with such organizations, by simple association with the Washington Post's editorial policy as well as its sponsors and supporters. In this regard, it is important to note that there is very little research that indicates how users of web media interpret links and other spatial arrangements within sites, but one can assume that some principles that are apparent in traditional forms of advertising and product placement also apply in an online context. Alternatively, by including HRW's debate on a forum space of a media outlet, it is also possible to achieve more visibility for the group and thus help it reach more users, with a more varied socio-economic-geographic background. Additionally, HRW's publicity is taken over by Washington Post requiring less effort from HRW to distribute its information. Also, unlike Amnesty International, HRW places more emphasis on its opinion editorials, which their members of staff have secured in prominent media outlets such as the International Herald Tribune. Thus, HRW's communication strategy still heavily relies on the magnifying lens of traditional media and continues to use the Internet as a complementary medium.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 09 2008

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PRESS CENTER ISSUES REPORTS AGENDA FOR REFORM TAKE ACTION JOIN DISCUSSION



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新闻中心

INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE  
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BEIJING 2008 OLYMPIC GAMES  
TORCH RELAY MAP  
BEIJING CITY WEBSITE

**BEIJING MAPS**

- Official Olympics Clickable Beijing Map
- Map of Beijing Highlights
- Map of Beijing Attractions
- List of Beijing Attractions (With Photos)

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- Beijing Transportation Options
- Beijing Subway Map (English)
- Beijing Subway Map (Chinese)
- Beijing Car Rental

**USEFUL NUMBERS**

- Useful Phone Numbers
- Airline Phone Numbers in Beijing

**CHINESE MEDIA**

- China Media Project (Hong Kong University)
- Guide to Chinese Media
- Chinese Web Portal (English version)

**OPED** The Hazards of an Unfree Press  
By Phelim Kine  
Friday, October 31 2008

**NEWS RELEASE** Internet Rights Protection Initiative Launches  
GNI Could Safeguard Freedom of Expression in China and Other Countries  
Wednesday, October 29 2008

**NEWS RELEASE** China: Hu Jia Sakharov Prize Spotlights China's Rights Crisis  
Release Award Winner and Other Jailed Rights Defenders  
Thursday, October 23 2008

**NEWS RELEASE** China: Extend New Media Rules to Chinese Reporters  
Lifting of Restrictions a Step Forward for Free Expression  
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**NEWS RELEASE** China: Olympics-Related Media Freedoms Should Not Expire  
Extension a Key Test of Reform Prospects  
Wednesday, October 15 2008

**OPED** Censorship Isn't Good for China's Health  
By Phelim Kine  
Saturday, October 11 2008

**NEWS RELEASE** China: Release Jailed Rights Activist Hu Jia  
Exonerate or Grant Medical Parole to Olympics Dissident  
Thursday, October 02 2008

**NEWS RELEASE** China: As Paralympics Launch, Disabled Face Discrimination  
Hiring Bias, Harassment of Disabled Organizations Undermine Laws  
Friday, September 05 2008

**NEWS RELEASE** China: Hosting Olympics a Catalyst for Human Rights Abuses  
IOC and World Leaders Fail to Challenge Great Leap Backward for Rights in China  
Friday, August 22 2008

**NEWS RELEASE** China: Olympic Sponsors Ignore Human Rights Abuses  
TOP Sponsors Should Back Introduction of a Permanent Olympic Rights Monitor  
Tuesday, August 19 2008

**OPED** No medals for the IOC  
By Minky Worden  
Friday, August 15 2008

**NEWS RELEASE** China: End Abuses of Media Freedom  
IOC Should Investigate and Publicize Abuses  
Friday, August 15 2008

**NEWS RELEASE** China: Police Detain Would-Be Olympic Protesters  
Increasing Repression of Activists, Media Sources; No Protests Approved Yet  
Wednesday, August 13 2008

**NEWS RELEASE** China: Games Open Amid Restrictions on Media  
Restrictions Violate Media Freedom Pledges to IOC  
Friday, August 08 2008

**OPED** Sponsoring the Olympics is Bad for Business  
By Sophie Richardson  
Wednesday, August 06 2008

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 next last »

**RIGHTS DEFENDERS**  
China's silenced rights advocates

**OLYMPIC SPONSORS**  
Business and human rights

**REPORTERS GUIDE**  
To Covering the Beijing Olympics

**SLIDE SHOWS**  
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**EXPERTS GUIDE**  
Sophie Richardson  
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Brad Adams  
Base Director  
Minky Worden  
Media Director  
Kenneth Roth  
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Carroll Bogert  
Associate Director

**FAQ: Beijing Olympics Basics**

**Overview of China Rights Developments**

**Media Contacts**

**In Their Own Words: Quoties from Chinese and IOC officials**

**Human Rights Watch in the News**

**CHINA'S GREAT LEAP**  
A rare look on the Olympics and human rights

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Figure 5. China.hrw.org main page (October 30, 2008)

Apart from an RSS feed link which would enable netizens to receive updates from the website as soon as they are made, the HRW Beijing Olympics dedicated page features no other sharing options, as Amnesty International does with its China debate dedicated site.

Two important differences from Amnesty International's approach need to be noted here: the HRW list of similar groups and its appeal to action taking. Amnesty International, Committee to Protect Journalists, Olympic Watch or Reporters Sans Frontieres.

Among the actions suggested are: writing to the President of the International Olympic Committee, the Chinese Premier, or by blogging for human rights in China while also finding ways to breach what the group calls "China's Great Firewall".

These two human rights advocacy groups have adopted quite differentiated

strategies for their online communications. While Amnesty turned new media into its main medium using a lot of the web's social features, HRW remained focused on a traditional strategy where traditional media outlets give visibility, credibility, reputation and weight by magnifying a cause both in their traditional forms and via their online presences – websites, blogs, forums etc. In this respect, Amnesty intended to turn its campaign site members and its online visitors into online ambassadors of Amnesty's message by providing them with a variety of means of accessing its information as well as sharing it. However, when it comes to messaging, the two groups concentrate on the same topics.

### **Quiet, too quiet activism in Beijing**

At the end of July 2008, just two weeks before the start of the Olympic Games, Amnesty International (2008a) was reporting that their websites were still blocked in China. Since the websites were spaces for sharing information both remotely from China and that could be reached by Internet users irrespective of their location, having the websites accessible during the Olympic Games was vital for both groups. However, it remains questionable as to why these groups focused their campaigns on China audiences, as a mechanism for promoting freedom of speech, since the groups' main targets were outside China. Moreover, since the information on the website is available only in English, French, Spanish and Arabic, it is further dubious as to whether the strategy to reach Chinese people was ever likely to be effective. Nevertheless, following successful campaigns aimed at lifting state censorship as a result of international media pressure, the two websites - together with others such as the BBC - were freely accessible in China during the Olympic Games.

This involved a mixture of online communications and traditional media relations, which resulted in a real-life pressure on Olympic authorities. Yet, it was exceptional and there was no apparent increase in communication in support for human rights promotion during the Beijing Olympic Games undertaken by human rights advocacy groups. Indeed, we consider that their activity was decreased drastically with official communication taking place only around key dates of the Games – such as the opening and closing ceremonies – rather than constantly during the Games. During this time, Amnesty International sent out only 4 press releases and statements while HRW issued 10. Moreover, the protests that did take place in Beijing were neither inspired nor influenced by any of the two groups we studied but rather by smaller ones such as Students for a Free Tibet<sup>7</sup> or FreeTibet.org<sup>8</sup>.

Moreover, there was no direct indication of Amnesty or HRW staff members who expected to be present in Beijing during the Games, nor any continued efforts to engage the Olympic or the Chinese authorities in a dialogue that could further human rights in China. This might be because activists considered that, once the Games had started, there would be little that their communication could do to influence and inspire change. This proposal is supported by Amnesty's China Debate forum censorship talks that took place during the June – August 2008, hence during the Olympics as well (The China Debate). However, the questions posed during Games time received rather little attention (2000 views and 5 comments at most) compared to those asked in June 2008 (more than 10.000 views and 40 comments). Alternatively, the activists themselves may have feared reprisals were they to enter China, thus breaking the law.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.studentsforafreetibet.org>

<sup>8</sup> <http://freetibet2008.org>

## **Raising Voices after Beijing**

Beijing celebrated the last day of the Olympic Games on August 24, 2008. Two days earlier, HRW labeled the Olympics as a catalyst for human rights abuses:

The reality is that the Chinese government's hosting of the Games has been a catalyst for abuses, leading to massive forced evictions, a surge in the arrest, detention, and harassment of critics, repeated violations of media freedom, and increased political repression (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

On the day of the closing ceremony, Amnesty published a concluding press release that emphasized China's need to learn from its Olympic mistakes and uphold human rights values (Amnesty International, 2008b). Both news articles were published on the groups' main websites. Shortly after the closing of the Games, Amnesty disabled the participatory/dialogical options offered by its forum. Nevertheless the website is still active online as proof of the talks about China that Amnesty initiated. A few months after the Games closed, HRW ceased posting new information on its China dedicated website, the last opinion editorial dating back to October 31, 2008. While the campaign websites were closed, the groups' activity continued, China and Olympics related communication resurfacing at dates relevant for either one of the parties. Furthermore, the groups' messages remained unchanged since August 2008, appeals for introduction of monitoring measures and human rights guarantees requirements from Olympic hosts being maintained.

While we cannot assess whether Amnesty's and HRW's campaigns were successful, we can confirm that the Internet was a major vehicle of communication for them. We may also conclude that, due to the particularities of China's firewall and of the Games time period where so much scrutiny took place, that the Internet was central to achieving their goals. While the groups had different approaches to communicating online - Amnesty made social media its central point, while HRW focused on the traditional, partisan media's power to amplify their cause - the groups' overall strategies were similar. Additionally, their hard push prior and post Games and soft communication during the Games has inspired other activist groups around the world in their shaping of their online communications. At the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games, similar strategies were apparent by Canadian activist groups such as, N02010<sup>9</sup> or Solidarity with Six Nations<sup>10</sup>. Both groups had an official web presence marked by a blog or official website and already acknowledge other resources and individuals that support their cause. This helped them build visibility and achieve momentum as well as take their cause further than the borders of British Columbia and the city of Vancouver. Finally, this shows once more that online activism can help transcend local borders and can use the Internet both as an official medium to communicate information as well as an alternative meant to enable direct contact with members and supporters.

## **Conclusion**

In a global, digitally mediated world, there are various dimensions of contemporary protest culture that require our reconsideration. First, the expansion of communication technology permits local concerns to reach a global audience with considerable immediacy who, in turn, may also actively shape their reception. A good

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<sup>9</sup> <http://no2010.com/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://6nsolidarity.wordpress.com/>

example of this is the British celebrity Stephen Fry's<sup>11</sup> re-tweeting of content related to the Iran election concerns of 2009 (McElroy, 2009). In this case, a celebrity's sharing of content and active interpretation of what was taking place thus becomes a primary frame around the issue at hand. This is a clear example of a celebratory acting both as an activist, cultural intermediary, and journalist.

An *open media* culture requires that some control over one's 'brand' or agenda is devolved, thus permitting the community to own and shape its development. This transition presupposes a shared value system, against which people may act and, while it is not difficult to imagine there is common ground in some cases, such as the world economy or climate change, it will require considerable work to ensure that local concerns have the kind of relevance for a global audience that would lead to greater support, rather than audience apathy. This may require local communities to compromise on their issues for a wider audience in order to optimize the profile of their concerns. For example, a community protests about local housing policy injustice may seek an alliance with other such communities in other parts of the world.

Second, the rise of transnational concerns means that protests against the institutions that do business across borders will find themselves under greater scrutiny by even greater advocacy groups. Thus, the growing monopolization of global companies creates a series of tensions for both politicians and user communities. Such challenges were reflected in the 2010 dispute between China and Google over uncensored search engines, which demonstrated that such a universally shared view about media freedom and access to information is not yet apparent. The debacle gave rise to considerable acts of protest over China's Internet laws.

More familiar examples of transnational protests have arisen in the context of fair-trade or ethical trade products, or concerns about the child labour. In the context of the Olympics, this has particular relevance, since its financial base is supported by some of the world's biggest brands, such as McDonald's, Visa, Lenovo, Coca-Cola, etc. From one perspective, the Olympic Games could function as a device to make such companies more publicly accountable – for example by adhering to the IOC's environmental policies - and so one may argue that the Olympics is an arbiter of activist concerns. Yet, the broader social concerns about how such companies may benefit from a mega-event that many members of the public believe should be free from corporate interests, deems that this mechanism of building greater corporate responsibility may not always be a primary value for the general public.

Finally, a global, digital era requires us to interrogate what counts as activism or protest. While we strongly advocate the idea that even the most minimal gesture online should qualify – such as sharing a website address via the social networking platform Twitter, which may require little more than two clicks of a mouse button – it will be necessary to consider strategically how different forms of activism lead to different results. Clearly, what arises from a Web 2.0 era of user-generated content is the capacity to build impact from the ground up. This is why a powerful web community can out perform a large transnational company in such terms as Google rankings and general visibility, as is typified by viral marketing campaigns. Yet, it remains to be seen whether digital activism – or hacktivism – can generate a

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<sup>11</sup> Comedian and writer Stephen Fry was one of the top-10 Twitter accounts until 2009, after which all ten positions were held by mass media organizations. Nevertheless, his use of Twitter led to its popularization in the mass media and his ongoing commentary on digital culture has engaged a number of audiences, including the UK's Digital Britain committee and iTunes festivals, at which he has given lectures on such issues as file sharing.

significant impact without receiving attention from traditional media. Of course, as a campaign escalates, there comes a point where the traditional media become an integral part of the cycle of news syndication, so these are incredibly difficult phenomena to analyze in isolation. Nevertheless, further research may study the interaction of traditional and online journalism to better gauge how *convergence* - a term that was applied to media systems in the 1990s - has reached the level of protest culture. In the Olympics, we suggest that this is already apparent.