
The Internet and grassroots politics: Nike, the athletic apparel industry and the anti-sweatshop campaign

Victoria Carty. Tamara : *Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science*. Las Cruces: 2001. Vol. 1, Iss. 2; pg. 34, 14 pgs

Abstract (Article Summary)

Carty examines ways in which the Internet has been employed to enhance political struggle in contemporary society. A case study of Nike Corp highlights the power and autonomy of transnational companies.

Full Text (7157 words)

Copyright TamaraLand Publishers 2001

[Headnote]

Abstract

[Headnote]

This paper examines ways in which the Internet has been employed to enhance political struggle in contemporary society. It uses a case study of the Nike Corporation to highlight the power and autonomy of Transnational Corporations operating within the global economy, which accompanies modes of grassroots organizing that foster globalized resistance to such hegemonic tendencies. The analysis argues that the Internet provides the resources and environment necessary for cohesive organized resistance to corporate culture. The Internet has facilitated organizing strategies among emerging New Social Movements, and it is clearly redefining our understanding of social interaction and political struggle.

Nike experienced tremendous growth between the early 1970s and late 1990s, dominating the global athletic footwear and apparel market. Its success had been fueled by the use of low wage labor in developing countries, accompanied by highly acclaimed marketing strategies and advertising campaigns. However, in the mid 1990s Nike began facing fierce criticism of its business practices in both of these spheres-production and marketing. In 1998, Nike revenues and stock prices dipped by nearly 50%, and the company was forced to layoff 1600 workers (Egan, 1998; Nike Annual Report, 1998).

The Internet has significantly accentuated awareness of the controversies surrounding Nike's business culture and practices. It has also provided the resources and environment essential for organized mobilization in the form of a New Social Movement (NSM). This paper explores how new information and communication systems impact society, and how the Internet is reconstructing our definition and understanding of social interaction and political struggle. Such an examination sheds light on the oscillating nature of contemporary social change, and how conflict between centers of corporate hegemonic domination can be undermined and subverted by marginal groups, and vice versa.

Globalizing Trends and Technological Change

The contemporary era can be characterized as one undergoing an intensified process of globalization, understood in terms of economic, political, cultural, and technological change (Dicken, 1998; Sklair, 1998). Globalization can be illustrated by a number of factors. The most basic is evidence of a qualitative change in the degree of interdependence and interaction in the world (Dicken, 1998). The technical revolution that began in the 1970s and the related economic, cultural, and political developments have contributed to an intensification of both concrete global interdependence and a consciousness of the global whole (Giddens, 1990; Castelles, 1989). David Harvey (1990) speaks of the 'time-space compression' brought on by recent advances in transportation, communication, and computer systems.

While globalization certainly has hegemonic properties, it is also prone to forms of resistance. Issues regarding global corporate social responsibility and other troubling aspects of the overall global system are areas that various groups and individuals are now mobilizing around. Gary Gereffi (2001) notes that "the Internet is challenging organizational dynamics and changing the way business is run." While this is definitely true and works advantageously for global corporate actors, it has also proven detrimental for them in some ways. For example, information regarding corporate abuses spreads quickly through cyberspace, bringing bad publicity to new levels of awareness, and facilitates mobilizing among activists while helping to recruit new members.

Marc Smith (2001) highlights the relationship between technology and social networks. He states, "The recent rapid changes in technology have produced profound effects globally on the quality of life, in social relationships, and in the nature and quality of communication. The technological revolution, in fact, has replaced the industrial revolution in importance" (Ebner, 2001). Because social life and social relations are increasingly constituted on a global scale, contemporary social change has taken on a new dynamic. Advances in mass media, information systems, and technology have radically changed the nature of political, subjective, and everyday life (Poster, 1995). The next section will assess some of the theoretical perspectives on the consequences of these changes.

Theories of Postmodernity and Postmodern Politics

There are competing views within theories of postmodernity as to whether human agency is stifled or invigorated under new social arrangements. Many theories dealing with the condition of postmodern society focus on media technology and its impact on social life. Some critique contemporary society by adopting a technological deterministic perspective. For example, Baudrillard (1988) conceives the postmodern era to be one of sheer simulations. He describes it as an era of information and signs as produced by electronic media, resulting in a triumph of effect over cause and surface over depth. He concludes that the subject has lost the ability to dominate the object and power is completely abstract, operating merely through the circulation of signs, which are devoid of meaning. Therefore, forms of domination are immune to rationalist critique as traditional forms of political strategy are undermined. As Mark Poster points out, Baudrillard's obsession with the unidirectional flow of information negates his ability to recognize new decentralized forms of media (1995:19).

In a similar fashion, Jameson (1991) views culture as a "matter of the media," due to the symbiosis between media and the market. As social relationships become dislocated people are no longer aware of the structures that shape their lives. Jameson has not, however, given up on political struggle completely, as has Baudrillard. He claims that in order to combat consumer capitalism, individuals must become aware of their individual and collective sense as subjects in multinational capitalism on a social as well as a spatial scale-what he labels "a radical politics for now" (Jameson, 1991:75,301).

An alternative postmodern critique illuminates a transformation in the character of power and a cultural shift that has dramatically changed possibilities for collective action (Pescosolido and

Rubin, 2000). Best and Kellner (1997), for example, advocate a combination of perspectives put forth by both postmodern and modern theory to map the broader features of social organization and conflicts, as well as features of fragmentation.

They reside that such an approach can account for both human agency and questions of social and economic structure. The twopronged approach can describe relations between different domains of social reality and combine micro-level phenomena with systematic features and relations of the social structure.

Therefore, they support a strategy of micro-politics as a way for individuals and groups to combat ever-novel challenges and forms of manipulation as presented by multinational capitalism and mass-mediated culture. Furthermore, they ascertain that through the process of deconstruction and targeting forces of decentered power, the diffusion of resistance politicizes new areas of social and personal experience.

According to this outlook, postmodernity offers a reflexivity or selfconsciousness that encourages nuanced forms of subjectivity and practices of the self, and creates new possibilities for social relations in a wide variety of sectors. It condones a more pluralistic form of activism, based on articulations among various flexible, fragmented and shifting sources of identity (Bauman, 1993). Haraway (1991) calls for coalitions based on affinity, contingency and mobile positioning, using what is shared in common at a particular time and setting.

New Social Movements

The expansion of international trade and overseas manufacturing has undoubtedly enhanced the power and wealth of TNCs over the past few decades. However, NSMs are seriously challenging this. NSMs embody community-based coalitions that are made up of a combination of labor, environmental groups, students, human rights groups, and NGOs. Their mission is to make issues such as equity, dignity, well being, and sustainability as important as profitability and capital accumulation, and to ultimately create a global civic movement (Evans, 2000). Tomlinson (1999) describes this process as one of 'distanciated identity,' whereby individuals embrace a sense of what unites us as human beings, of common risks and possibilities, and of mutual responsibility (194). These NSMs are indicative of an increased consciousness that embraces a global, compassionate perspective.

NSMs practice a type of political strategy termed "globalization from below." This involves grassroots activities and streetlevel protests across disperse geographical locations. Identity politics (in a global formation) is seen as the most fruitful way of resisting all forms of injustices within the global system (Sklair, 1998). It entails establishing global networks of people with similar identities and interests, outside the control of the national and state and local authorities. In doing so, activists hope to modify the institutional forms of organization globalization from above. Because the ties between social movements are flexible, activists are able to reach wide and heterogeneous audiences that can organize from different angles to form broad coalitions across various movement domains (Rucht, 1999:212-13).

Keck and Sikkink (1995) refer to these recent forms of resistance as "transnational advocacy networks." The strategy is to link Third World workers with more empowered political actors and groups that have more leverage in influencing decisions regarding global economic dynamics. Peter Evans (2000) applies this framework to what he calls transnational consumer/labor activists. Within these networks, TNCs are the target of norm violations, and material losses to their bottom line are deemed to be the only thing that will hold them accountable to global norms (Evans, 2000:231).

NSMs, therefore, incorporate a global perspective to link international issues with local concerns. The link between macro- and micro-level dynamics is essential. Evans argues that NSMs and their links to transnational networks, which include NGOs and faith-based organizations, can give local organizing new prospects of success. Likewise, local mobilization is an essential element of counter-hegemonic globalization (Evans, 2000:240).

Advances in technology have played a crucial role in the organization and success of NSMs as a way to bridge the macro/micro divide. New communication technologies, such as the Internet, have changed the terms in which social and political conflicts are played out. The increasing sense of mutual interdependence due to enhanced globalization, combined with the means for communicating across vast distances, has proven effective in producing new forms of cultural and political solidarity and understanding of international norms (Ross, 1999).

As Poster (1995) points out, the recent technological advances have "enabled a system of multiple producers, distributors and consumers to use decentralized and newly accessible media technologies in everyday practices" (5). He further states, "When users have decentralized, distributed, direct control over when, what, why, and with whom they exchange information...it seems to breed critical thinking, activism, democracy and equality" (28). This electronically mediated communication can challenge systems of domination. He further states:

the mode of information enacts a radical reconfiguration of language, one which constitutes subjects... in favor of one that is multiplied, disseminated and decentred, continuously interpellated as an unstable identity. At the level of culture, this instability poses both dangers and challenges which, if they become part of a political movement, or are connected with politics of feminism, ethnic/racial minorities...may lead to a fundamental challenge to modern social institutions and structures (Poster, 1995:57).

Nike Corporation: Allegations of Sweatshop Labor and Consumer Activism

Over the last few years, the issue of sweatshop labor has come to the forefront of political consciousness among First World activists. The Nike Corporation, in particular, has proven to a primary target of condemnation. Until recently, the inequities between First World consumers and Third World manufacturers of consumer goods had been obscured from mainstream consciousness. It was not until the early 1990s that information regarding the history of commodities—the location and conditions under which they were made—came to be a matter of concern among a broadening scale of consumers. The increasing interdependence generated by globalization and electronic forms of media has increased the linkages between producers and consumers across the globe. Consequently, a significant number of consumers have become aware of the crucial role that low-wage workers in developing nations play in the production of the merchandise they purchase.

In the mid 1990s, scholars, labor rights activists, and journalists began citing numerous systematic violations of workers' rights in Nike factories. These included health and safety deficiencies, discrimination against trade unions, forced over-time, unfair wages, and the use of hire-and-fire practices to avoid paying fringe benefits. There were also accusations of increasing production quotas whenever workers met them and onsite living arrangements, which were both inadequate and dangerous.

Nike has been one of the most visible and public targets of hostility regarding the use of sweatshops for different reasons. Its omnipresence in economic, social, and cultural life on a global scale is hard to miss. It has relentlessly dismissed alleged abuses and responsibility, while engaging in a selfcongratulatory stance concerning its "fair and just" practices, despite strong evidence indicating otherwise. Nike's contrived image as a defender of human rights as projected through its advertising also displays an arrogant sense of hypocrisy. And there is a stark contrast

between its advertising budget and its budget to pay those producing its merchandise.

In 1992, Nike followed suit with other major marketing and retail companies operating in developing countries by instating its Code of Conduct. By means of the code, the Nike Corporation affirms that, "we are driven to do not only what is required, but what is expected of a leader" (Nike Code of Conduct, 1992). However, not until 1997 would Nike pay the minimum wage in Indonesia, and not until late February of 2001 would Nike acknowledge any abuses in its factories, despite ten solid years of documented and certified abuses by numerous human rights groups and NGOs. This admission came after a scathing report by Global Alliance, one of Nike's own monitors. Therefore, its code of conduct has been largely perceived by critics as an attempt to appease wary consumers by initiating voluntary self-corrections (Ballinger, 1997).

The Anti-Nike Campaign

Assembly line workers in developing countries have had little success on their own in their struggle against the exploitative conditions under which they work. The combination of a fear of jeopardizing their jobs, ignorance regarding their legal rights, the constant interference by the military in labor negotiations, and the harassment, arrest, incarceration, torture and even murder of labor organizers severely restricts their ability (Herbert, 1996).

Thus, concerned citizens in the international community have begun to advocate for workers' rights and to serve as monitors of the global corporate agenda. Grassroots organizations have enhanced their leverage in dealing with TNCs by tirelessly striving to increase the level of awareness and interest of sweatshop labor among consumers in developed nations. They confront citizens, consumers, and investors with the embedded connection between purchasing decisions and the material conditions workers are subject to.

The 1996 Kathy Lee Gifford scandal (whereby it was discovered that the clothing line she endorses was made in sweatshops in Honduras) served as a springboard for the anti-sweatshop movement. Most importantly, it caught the attention of mainstream national media. It also begged the issue of the hypocrisy regarding the millions of dollars paid to celebrities who endorse consumer goods in comparison to the sub minimum wage workers who are paid to provide these goods. The use of the mass media by activists has also played an integral role in mobilization against Nike. Reports of labor abuses by Nike in leading newspapers and on mainstream TV networks throughout the late 1990s led to numerous editorials, columns, political cartoons (including over two weeks of coverage in *Doonesbury*), and write-ups by sportswriters addressing the issue (Shaw, 1999).

The anti-Nike campaign took on a form of "globalized identity politics" For example, youth groups and students identify with people roughly their age working long hours under horrendous conditions. Women's groups (including NOW) identify with female laborers and issues of sexism.

Asian groups identify with Asians and are sympathetic to the racist underpinnings of using Third World Labor. Labor groups are sympathetic to restrictions on collective bargaining. Human rights and faith-based groups, as well as large investors connect with ethical issues.

What ultimately developed was an umbrella "working group on Nike" made up an amalgamation of these smaller groups and campaigns, which resonated with groups and individuals across a number of dimensions (Shaw, 1999). Among the different concerns a common theme emerged-to demand global corporate social responsibility and respect for human rights. Though fragmented, these concerns were channeled into a cohesive focus and strategy making this vast extension of identity politics into a politically strong and effective coalition. These networks were forged among the various groups in the United States, as well as between these groups in the U.S. and other

countries such as Canada, the U.K. and Australia, and between these groups and workers in developing countries. This could not have happened without the Internet, which clearly opened up new possibilities for social relations that span the First and Third Worlds.

The Internet fits perfectly into the schema of postmodern politics. Activists can efficiently and cheaply disseminate information and coordinate activities across the world in a matter of seconds. This is especially important for NGOs working on very limited budgets. NGOs and human rights groups have been essential in the struggle against sweatshops. The Internet also serves as a decentralized form of communication, and it facilitates the forging of links within and among various groups on an international level. It was through grassroots networking via the Internet that international movement against Nike steadily gained in momentum.

Students have played a vital role in this movement. Their access to the Internet, and the fact that they tend to be heavy users puts them in a position to spearhead the campaign. Recent survey data illustrates that the huge increase in political involvement among students on college campuses is largely due to new media activism (Williams, 2000). This, however, has spilled over into material acts of civil disobedience.

The biggest issue on college campuses right now regarding sweatshop labor is whether schools should drop their membership to Fair Labor Association (FLA), which is business backed, has minimal standards for improving factory conditions, and engages in self-monitoring. Students are pushing for administration to drop the FLA and sign up with the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC), an alternative student and NGO backed organization, which has higher standards and demands truly independent monitoring.

Web Resistance

There are a number of host sites promoting activism on the web, some of them very general and others addressing a particular concern, industry, or company. Many of them specifically target students. For example, steamtunnels.com is a site that promotes online activism, "enabling students to organize massive national campaigns by providing them with a vast range of organizational educational technology" (steamtunnels website). It holds virtual training sessions in preparation for big protests, offers online handbooks, activism guides, chants, discussion groups, and information regarding how students can start their own campus chapter of a national movement.

Labornet.org is a more specialized online organization designed to combat sweatshop labor. It is a member network of the Institute for Global Communications (IGC). The IGC "advances the work of progressive organizations and individuals through online technologies, which serve as a gateway. Now in its 13 year, it has changed the way the progressive community worked by introducing them to email, online discussions, mailing lists and the Web" (IGC website). Labornet provides links to other organizations that are involved with campaigns and boycotts against various companies. It also contains an International Directory of Labor Unions on the Internet, a listing of Labor Media organizations and discussion groups, and quotes from famous inspirational speakers that individuals can incorporate into their own speeches.

Global Exchange, a San Franciscobased NGO has been very much involved in the anti-Nike campaign through its "action alerts" which are posted frequently on the Web. It used the Internet extensively while organizing the first global protest against Nike, which took place in October of 1997. The result was over eighty-four communities demonstrating simultaneously outside of Nike retailers in twelve different countries (Shaw, 1999). It offers a Campaign starter kit, which consists of a letter to Nike CEO, Phil Knight; a petition; a city anti-sweatshop resolution; a sample student government resolution; a sample letter to the editor; and recent accomplishments of activist strategies. It encourages students to start a Nike campaign on college campuses through a

number of different measures. Students can request a copy of the contract universities have with Nike, ask the regents and athletic directors to suspend the contracts until Nike improves labor practices, and pass a resolution condemning it through student government. It also gives advice on how to adopt a code of conduct that school licensees and manufacturers must abide by, and suggests selling t-shirts as a fundraiser (with the slogan "Just Don't Do It!").

It further gives advice on planning rallies and demonstrations at sports events, organizing petition drives, encouraging Nike Teach-ins by providing talking points, and, more generally, by educating others through giving talks at local schools, churches, community centers, or business associations. At the end of these suggestions, there is a request to "LET US KNOW IF ANY OF YOUR ACTIONS WORK." This highlights the flexible nature of the pedagogy used in this type of political struggle, and how this is enhanced through the two way flow (or "multi way flow") of communication provided by the Internet.

The National Labor Campaign (NLC) offers publications and videos for a nominal donation on its web site. And, "labor alerts," a service of Campaign for Labor Rights (CLR) sends out frequent updates on the anti-sweatshop movement and a bi-monthly newsletter. CLR has action packets available regarding international forms of mobilization that include informative fact sheets, sample press releases, and a flier master for promoting events. It also includes Nike Mobilization reports from local communities regarding international mobilization. BehindTheLabel.org is another excellent site, which posts information on the anti-sweatshop movement. In the upcoming months it will convert into an Internet news channel covering the global sweatshop and industry and serve as an "online community of people arguing for justice in the global economy."

Combining aspects of the Web and the mass media, the dogeatdog.com site reveals video clips from the film "The Big One," directed by film-director and political commentary, Michael Moore. It includes Nike C.E.O. Phil Knight's refusal to allow Moore's camera crew to accompany them on a trip to Indonesia, and his justification of the use of 14-year old workers. Other websites on dogeatdog.com regarding Nike's labor practices include ways to subscribe to mailing lists that give updates on Nike protests around the world. It also provides links to the Clean Clothes Campaign and The Ethical Shopper, among several others.

Professor of Business and Management at New Mexico State University, David Boje, has one of the most extensive archives of Nike-related materials on his home page (<http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/>). It contains discrepancies between Nike Official Statements provided by Amanda Tucker, labor spokesperson for Nike, and NGO reports at the International Association for Business & Society meeting held in August 2000 that Boje attended. He also includes a link to Academics Studying Nike—a summary of scholarly writings on Nike. The link also provides a proposal for an international project Boje is organizing which will monitor factories for sweatshop abuses and examine the impact that the emerging student movement has had on improving working conditions. Much of this information is designed for student access for classes he teaches as a critical approach to more traditional forms of management training.

Also on Boje's (2001) website you can find a plea to students, faculty, and administrators at New Mexico State University to join the WRC. After conducting a survey at the campus bookstore, he used the website of the three biggest firms supplying merchandise to gather information regarding what goods each produces, where they are made, the price, labor costs, and NGO reports on factory conditions. He, therefore, provides a methodology as well as a petition for a sweat free campus.

The student movement group, United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) has played perhaps the biggest role in the antisweatshop movement over the past few years. Most of their information sharing and strategizing takes place electronically. On the USAS website, activists can get USAS organizing manuals from USAS CLR and IINITE (I Union of Needletrades Industrial and Textile

Employees). These organizing tools include information as to how to organize a campus campaign, the USAS model codes of conduct, protest chants, sample fliers, fashion show scripts, petitions, campus bookstore research, plans for civil disobedience, educational anti-sweatshop workshops, updated FLA critiques, an entire list of school contact information including email addresses of college presidents. The intent is to publicize actions, distribute information, and help fuel turnout.

On the USAS listserv there are frequent requests for information among high school students as to how to start up their own groups, and students seeking advice from other victorious student groups. The listserv also encourages spring break alternatives for the advocacy of social change, scholarships and fellowship opportunities for activists, and information on upcoming USAS conferences, as well as the USAS collegiate Apparel Research Initiative Summer Immersion. It has links to nearly seventy other sites including activist groups against both sweatshops and consumerism, and it provides alternative sources to media/radio, as well as the websites for the major mainstream press. It includes a professor's course on sweatshops, and professors from Berkeley and Harvard supply a calculated living wage and a way to ensure independent monitoring of factories. It also has a directory for the Institute for Global Communications, and an archive of over 100 pages of USAS activities.

The listserv also announces regional tour dates for The Olympic Wage Campaign speaking tour, as well as student responses to it. The tour is co-directed by former assistant soccer coach at St. John's University, Jim Keady, who was fired after refusing to endorse Nike. Subsequently, he went to Indonesia to live among Nike factory workers on the \$1.25 a day wage they earn. While there, he interviewed hundreds of workers and kept an online diary on his website, nikewages.org, detailing abuses and forms of exploitation. His Interactive/Multimedia presentation on college campuses depicts the conditions workers are subject to.

The Kukdong Strike: The Internet Proven as Activists' Ally

Over the past few months the USAS website and listserv have been inundated with information, strategizing, and discussions regarding a recent worker strike at a Nike factory, which began in January 2001 in Puebla, Mexico. The factory is called Kukdong and is owned by a North Korean firm. Over 800 workers went on strike for three days in reaction to a host of abusive conditions, the most egregious being workers forced to sign with government-mandated unions in order to be employed. A police crackdown resulted whereby several workers were beaten, many needing medical treatment. When the strike ended and workers returned, they faced intimidation, and in some cases refusal to be re-employed (especially the organizers of the strike that were also charged with false indictments).

Daily updates of the events in Puebla were posted on the listserv and USAS website. These consisted of press releases, pictures, and video documentation. USAS also organized a Kukdong listserv, which allowed activists to respond immediately to changing conditions, to lend support in real time, and to send monitors to the region to document abuses. It also allowed for solidarity among workers across the globe with words of encouragement. For example, posted on the listserv in late January was a letter from a Kukdong worker in Indonesia lending support to the striking workers in Mexico (both of which produce for Nike). The Indonesian worker provided encouragement by stating that after eight years of strikes, Indonesian workers successfully attained the right to form an independent union that has resulted in a number of additional benefits.

Subscribers to the listserv were given information as to how to contact Nike and Kukdong directly, in order to assure them that consumers were aware of events as they unraveled in Mexico. Activists were prompted to demand that management at the factory comply with Mexican labor laws, Nike's code of conduct, the respective universities' codes of conduct, and the

international agreement regarding the rights of freedom to organize. Email addresses were made available for letters of solidarity to workers, and for contacting the Labor Secretary in Mexico, the Global Director for Labor Practices at Nike, the Senior Labor Practices Manager at Nike, Kukdong International (Mexico), Kukdong Corporation Korea (Korea), and the Mexican Cabinet Secretary.

In February, "National Days of Action" were coordinated over the listserv on two occasions as an act of solidarity in support of the workers' demands, consisting of protests on college campuses and outside of Niketowns. The underlying importance of the Kukdong struggle is the lack of sufficient monitoring under the FLA. Thus, other coordinated events included an April 1, 2001 day of campus activism to prompt university administrators to drop the FLA and join the WRC.

The findings of David Boje, after personally inspecting the situation at Kukdong would support the students' request. Boje and others compared four different monitoring reports of the Kukdong situation as undertaken by Verite (the certified FLA monitor), PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC), the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF), and representatives of the WRC. In contrast to Boje's firsthand experience of talking to workers and observing events, the reports issued by Verite, PWC, and the ILRF were all seriously flawed and missed several blatant instances of human rights abuses. He refers to the mechanisms in place as "the fox guarding the hen house," in that all three monitoring firms lack legitimation because they are not truly independent entities (Boje, Rosile, and Carillo, 2001).

Students from other developed countries have also joined the USAS listserv and share information concerning their activities. They also instigate coordinating international strategies of protest. In London, Sweatshop Madness, the Socialist Alliance, and NO SWEAT have held strikes at the London NikeTown using street theater. They are also targeting soccer team sponsorships in the U.K. (Nike's endorsement of the Manchester team is reportedly the biggest sponsorship in soccer history). NO SWEAT has recently inquired as to how to join the FLA or WRC. There are similar antisweatshop groups operating in Australia and Canada that are also connected to the USAS listserv.

After weeks of intimidation and refusal of managers to allow organizers of the strike to return to work, charges were finally dropped against two of the five leaders of the strike as directed by Nike. The reinstatement of the two workers was broadcast on live radio throughout Puebla. Nike also declared it would not "cut and run" from Puebla, but it would continue producing there (a tactic Nike has undertaken several times in Indonesia). Both of these are perceived as major victories, and signs that grassroots organizing, facilitated by the Internet, can empower activists and force these kinds of concessions. Acknowledging the Internet as an invaluable tool in the anti-Nike campaign, Nike spokesperson, Veda Manager recently stated, "You make changes because it's the right thing to do. But obviously our actions have clearly been accelerated by the web" (Klein, 2000:393).

Websites as Both an Asset and Liability: The Oscillating Nature of Social Change

Nike has aggressively been using the Internet for its own strategic purposes, serving as a marketing and PR mechanism.

It contains recent press coverage, announces new NikeTown openings and accomplishments of its various endorsers, the results of Nike-sponsored sports events, and provides information regarding its general operations. The Net is Nike's latest arena in which to constantly innovate its image and hock its wares, and to optimize potential investment and development. One of the latest features is the Nike ID custom shoebuilding enterprise, which allows navigators to tailor their own Nike shoe in synch with their own special preferences.

According to Knight, the Net will be as critical to the brand in the future as Michael Jordan has been in the past. He claims that the Internet "has a power equal to Jordan in the new millennium" (Warner, 2000). Ian Yolles, a participant in the initial meetings Knight organized when designing the website elaborates, "Previously, as an athlete, you know you've arrived when you have your own Nike TV commercial. Our hope is someday the goal is you know you've arrived when you're part of a concept piece of Nike.com" (Warner, 2000).

The site also includes some coverage of its labor problems. Its FAQ page on wages and related labor rights issues responds to concerns of various advocacy groups. It publishes the results of factories monitored by PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC), as well as monitoring reports by students who accompanied PWC on certain visits. Having invited the students as a PR maneuver, Nike could not very well censure the student reports. However, this information provided to Nike and displayed on its own website was not advantageous to the company's already blemished reputation.

The reports were much more scathing than Nike had probably hoped for. Students reported extensive problems such as the lack of unannounced visits, the fact that workers were interviewed inside factories, the lack of training and experience of PWC monitors, the lack of standard procedures, the lengths of the visits were much too short, and workers were not at ease. All of these criticisms regarding Nike's internal monitoring system have been aired over the past several years but have been denied by Nike. This, again, brings up the issue of the FLA monitoring system.

The voluntary disclosure of its factory locations has also proven problematic for Nike. Under pressure from students and administrators at some of the largest colleges and universities, Nike conceded to publish (on its own website) the location of factories producing for the particular schools that had requested this information. In light of the Kukdong strike, students quickly checked the site to discover that Kukdong was producing sweatshirts for many of the universities most heavily involved with the USAS campaign. This facilitated the quick response and organizing among students. It also provided students with ammunition at universities where administrators insist that the FLA's monitoring mechanisms are sufficient.

A third contentious issue arose when an MIT graduate student, Jonah Peretti, requested the word "sweatshop" be stitched onto his shoes, responding to the service now offered by Nike on its website for consumers to personalize their shoes. Nike responded that for a number of "technical," though incredulous reasons (such as the word "sweatshop" is slang), it could not accommodate Mr. Peretti's request. In the final analysis, Nike had to concede that the reason for rejecting the request was that the company reserves the right to reject anything "we consider inappropriate or simply do not want to place on our products." The final response by the student: "Could you send a color snapshot of the ten-year old Vietnamese girl who makes my shoes?"

Peretti emailed the series of electronic correspondences between himself and Nike personnel to about twelve friends (Peretti, 2001). In few weeks time, it had been circulated so extensively over the Internet that it had reached millions of people. Peretti describes how individual consumers combating exploitative practices of global TNCs is not necessarily a "David vs. Goliath" analogy given the access/speed/low cost of high tech such as the Internet. While Nike has access to the media, and can spend a few million dollars for a 30-second spot on television to reach millions of viewers, given the new "networked economy," ordinary citizens can use "micromedia" to reach the same number for no/limited cost. And, the news filtered up from the micromedia to the mass media. Even the conservative mainstream press, including *Time* Magazine, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Business Week*, and the show, *NBC Today* covered the story. At the height of circulation, Peretti was receiving 500 messages a day from all six continents. In an interview with *The Nation*, Peretti argues that this will alter how people think about media (as well as the sweatshop issue) both of which provide an exciting new opportunity for social change. He

states, "The dynamics of decentralized distribution systems and peer-to-peer networks are as counterintuitive as they are powerful. By understanding these dynamics, new forms of social protest become possible, with the potential to challenge some of the constellations of power traditionally supported by the mass media (Peretti, 2001).

However, Nike has shown that two can play at this game of sabotage. When ten student activists attempted their "Truth Tour" - traveling across the United States from New York to Nike headquarters in Oregon, protesting outside of Niketowns along the way, they were sadly disappointed. Their plan was organized and announced over the web, and their daily events were to be webcast daily. Because of this, awaiting them at each retail store was the local police and store security guards. During the group's first stop in New York, security cameras captured on film a major, 5-floor disruption by student activists that included both chaos and violence. Additionally, Nike personnel investigated anti-Nike websites, downloaded information from the Truth Tour website (including bios of the activists), and sent the videotape of the New York ruckus to the prospective tour destinations. Upon arrival at the ensuing Niketowns, the Truth Tour activists were met by security guards informing them that they were not welcome into the store, and their plans of organized resistance were consistently foiled (Emerson, 2001).

Nike clearly claimed victory in this instance by using such techniques. However, the seemingly overly paranoid retail giant looked rather foolish after recently trying to implement a similar strategy. In Melbourne City, Australia, Nike prepared for May Day protests outside of Niketown by boarding up the store and placing barricades around the area. Its anticipation of violence was miscalculated. Twelve thousand protesters showed up merely to peacefully sing songs and leaflet. Perhaps out of sheer embarrassment and frustration for a self-imposed day of lost sales, the police, under the persuasion of Nike officials, fined protesters for breaking a controversial by-law that was recently reinstated to prevent the distribution of race hatred material (Kubecki and Szego, 2001).

In another effort to retaliate against activists, Nike has set up billboards and posters around Australia that feature a fake organization called the FFFF which supposedly objects to the "unfair" high tech Nike football boots, wanting fairness in football (La Canna, 2001). The specific attack on the groups that organize and spread information via the Internet is unmistakable. Included on the billboards is a web address, ffff.com.au, which parodies many anti-Nike websites, but that directs viewers to the latest Nike products. Nike's message is clear: "ringe" groups that are basically liars or misinformed at best, are not to be trusted. The site was a takeoff from the real anti-Nike site, bantheboot.com, which provides information on working conditions in Nike factories. The billboards are also cleverly designed to give the impression that vandals have defaced the ads. In response, activists are crossing out the ffff.com.au and replacing it with their site. What is at play here is the jockeying over which group can better, more capably, and convincingly subvert the other's message.

Conclusion

Against some of the more extreme claims of Baudrillard and the pessimism Jameson expresses regarding political struggle, this research shows how grassroots efforts have effectively coordinated action to resist forms of exploitation. While globalization has made it easier for TNCs to move through the international arena, it has also increased social interaction and social organization among its challengers across vast distances by opening up new avenues of political participation and new discourses of identity. Individuals across diverse groups and geographical locations have adopted new strategies to forge alliances and successfully question Nike's ideology and practices.

The Internet has proven to be a medium that enhances the interconnectedness and consciousness of groups and individuals on a global scale. This has opened up new possibilities

for social relations between workers in developing countries and activists in core countries, and concerned citizens across national boundaries. The anti-Nike campaign represents a form of pluralistic activism, one that is contingent on changing conditions and what Haraway refers to as "mobile positioning. " NSMs are having at least a certain level of success at their "globalization from below" strategies, using identity politics to forge these new transnational advocacy networks. The flexibility of the Internet as a mobilizing resource cannot be underscored in its assistance in promoting a political pedagogy, which fosters critical thinking, compassion, equality, and activism. It also gives citizens a way to define social problems in ways not depicted by the mass media or corporate-dominated society.

[Reference]

References

[Reference]

- Kleine, N. (2000). No logo. New York: Picador Press.
Labornet.com <http://Labornet.com/>
- La Canna, X. (2001, April 9). Protestors target Nike ads. The Age On-line.
- Nike Annual Report. Beaverton, OR: Nike Corporation.
- Nikebiz.com website. <http://Nikebiz.com/>
- Pescosolido, B., & Rubin, B. (2000). The web of group affiliations revisited: Social life, postmodernism and sociology. *Annual Sociological Review*, 65 (1): 52-73.
- Poster, M. (1995). *Second media age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Ross, A. (1999). *No sweat*. New York: Verso.
- Rucht, D. (1999). The transnationalization of social movements: Trends, causes and problems. In D. Haspeter K. Rucht, & D. Rucht (Eds.) *Social Movements in a Globalizing World*. New York: MacMillan Press Ltd.

[Reference]

- Shaw, R. (1999). *Reclaiming America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sklair, L. (1998). The transnational capitalist class and global capitalism. *Political Power and Social Theory*, 12: 3-43
- Steamtunnels.com website. [http:// Steamtunnels.com/](http://Steamtunnels.com/)
- Summersault.com website for Campaign for Labor Rights. <http://www.summersault.com/-agj/clr/>
- Tomlinson, J. (1999). *Globalization and culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- usasnet.org website. <http://usasnet.org/> Warner, B. (2000, May 29). Nike's new religion. *The Industry Standard*, pp. 94-100.
- Williams, J. (2000). Are the 60s making a comeback? *Student Advantage Magazine*, pp. 18-24.
- Victoria Carty is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA 22807. E-mail: cartyvl@jmu.edu Phone: (540) 568-5361.

[Author Affiliation]

George Mason University, US

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Subjects:

- Companies: Nike Inc(Ticker:NKE, NAICS: 3149, 5139, 316219, 422340, Duns:05-095-7364)
- Author(s): Victoria Carty
- Article types: Feature
- Publication title: Tamara : Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science. Las Cruces: 2001. Vol. 1, Iss. 2; pg. 34, 14 pgs

Source Type: Periodical

ISSN/ISBN: 15325555

Text Word Count 7157