



How the Net killed the MAI

Grassroots Globalisation

by Madelaine Drohan

High-powered politicians had reams of statistics and analysis on why a set of international investing rules would make the world a better place.

They were no match, however, for a global band of grassroots organisations, which, with little more than computers and access to the Internet, helped derail a deal.

Indeed, international negotiations have been transformed after the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) was successfully routed last April 1998 by opposition groups, which—alarmed by the trend toward economic globalisation—used some globalisation of their own to fight back.

Using the Internet's capability to broadcast information instantly worldwide, groups such as the Council of Canadians and the Malaysia-based Third World Network have been able to keep each other informed of the latest developments and supply information gleaned in one country that may prove embarrassing to a government in another.

By pooling their information they have broken through the wall of secrecy that traditionally surrounds international negotiations, forcing governments to deal with their complaints.

"We are in constant contact with our allies in other countries," said Maude Barlow, the Council of Canadians' chairwoman. "If a negotiator says something to someone over a glass of wine, we'll have it on the Internet within an hour, all over the world."

The success of the networking was clear when ministers from the 29 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) admitted that the global wave of protest had swamped the deal.

"This is the first successful Internet campaign by non-governmental organisations," said one diplomat involved in the negotiations. "It's been very effective."

The OECD, which represents largely the major industrial economies halted the negotiations aimed at develop-

ing international rules for foreign investment, similar to those for trade in goods. It is unclear when, or even if, the OECD will try again.

The irony in this outcome is that the OECD, which has been an ardent advocate of globalisation and has done much research into its effects, did not recognise that advocacy groups would use cyber-globalisation to further their own ends.

OECD secretary-general Donald Johnston conceded that the OECD was caught flat-footed: "It's clear we needed a strategy on information, communication and explication," he told a press conference.

The OECD's efforts to harness the Internet have not caught up in color, content and consumer friendliness to those of the advocacy groups.

For example, the OECD report released this week on the benefits of opening markets and investment is a compilation of statistics and analysis written in language more readily understood by economists than by the average person. Instead of finding examples of real people who have benefited from globalisation, to help trade ministers make their case, the report repeats many of the same statistics on economic growth, investment and the dangers of protectionism.

By comparison, hundreds of advocacy groups, in attempting to galvanize opposition to the MAI, used terms and examples that brought their message home to the public. Their sites on the Internet's Worldwide Web are colorful and easy to use, offering primers on the MAI that anybody could understand.

Canadian Trade Minister Sergio Marchi has taken the OECD to task for its poor communication effort, although he agrees some of the blame must be shared by the member governments. He said the lesson he has learned is that "civil society"—meaning public interest groups—should be engaged much sooner in a negotiating process, instead of governments trying to negotiate around them.

Barlow of the Council of Canadians, which has more than 100,000 members, called the OECD report on the benefits of globalisation "pathetic."

In an interview in Paris, where she was taking part in a protest against the MAI, Barlow said the immediacy of the Internet has changed the dynamics of advocacy campaigns.

She is a veteran of the campaigns against the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and the North American Free Trade Agreement. The Internet was not in widespread use when those campaigns were conducted.

Today, however, advocacy groups make sure useful information end up in the right hands right away. "If we know something that is sensitive to one government, we get it to our ally in that country instantly," she said. "I don't think governments will ever be able to do this kind of secret negotiations again."

For example, when the Council of Canadians got its hands on a draft version of the MAI last year, this was immediately posted on its Web site. They made sure allies around the world knew it was there through E-mail correspondence.

The Internet also provides a low-cost way for groups in the Third World to get their message out and keep on top of developments. "All they need is one computer," Barlow said.

The major Internet sites of these advocacy groups provide hyperlinks to others involved in the campaign, as well as phone numbers and E-mail addresses, and often bibliographies of relevant books.

It adds up to a powerful tool that the advocacy groups are using to better effect than governments and the OECD at the moment. Barlow predicts that this advantage may not last now that the OECD members have seen its potential. "They'll be revving up their PR machines."

But so are the advocacy groups. The next stage, she said, is to start making suggestions about what should be in trade agreements, rather than just opposing what the negotiators propose.

The groups are already trading ideas on solutions, and another aspect of globalisation, the growing spread of English, is easing their way. "Pretty well everybody speaks English," said Barlow. "It's the universal language."

Tony Clarke, director of the Canadian Polaris Institute, stresses that anti-MAI groups such as his are not against all aspects of globalisation. Their use of the Internet itself is proof of that.

"We're against this model of economic globalisation," he said, referring to the MAI. "But the global village, the idea of coming together and working together, is a great dream."

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