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## Activist Networks

**This chapter explores:**

- (1) The concepts of network and activist network as well as global and local levels of activist networks.
- (2) The external approach to the study of activist networks, in which textual analysis leads to an understanding of the interconnections between nodes.
- (3) The internal approach to activist networks, which puts researchers in the midst of a network, working directly with the activists involved.

In the most basic sense, networks are nodes that are connected together in some way. Although these nodes can be interconnected in a variety of different ways (e.g., trade and exchange of goods), contemporary researchers view the connections between nodes as modes of communication and communicative action (e.g., Eriksson 2005; Huesca 2001; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Van Dijck 2013). Manuel Castells (1996) explains that networks are open structures that expand and develop through communication; integration into a network depends on whether or not a node shares the necessary codes for communication with other nodes. As noted in chapter 1, most research has focused on networks that take one of three shapes: the line, the star, and the all-channel

(Evan 1972). The primary variable that influences the shape of a network are the different routes or connections that nodes have to others; the direction of the connection (i.e., one way or two way) also influences the shape. In the case of the line network, the communication is strictly one way, from one node to the next. The star network can entail one-way communication from the hub to all of the other nodes, or two-way communication between nodes and hub; in either case, the hub has control over the flow of communication between nodes. Finally, the all-channel network entails two-way communication between all nodes (see Figure 5-1).

In addition, Evan situates these nodes as predominately organizations, although some researchers take the view of individual people as nodes within networks (e.g., Harlow 2011). According to Evan—as well as Arquilla and Ronsfeldt (2001), Best (2005), and Stengrim (2005) among others—networks are collections of organizations that are interconnected through the ways in which they communicate. Castells (2000) further developed the concept of networks by showing how they are not so much hierarchical or structured organizations, but rather interconnections grounded in one important dichotomous rationale: inclusion or exclusion; essentially, groups or nodes are either in or out. Being a member of a network entails an identity of sorts that is maintained through the threat of expulsion. The advent of interactive media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, has made the concept of individual people as nodes in networks more prominent in recent years (e.g., Van Dijck 2013).

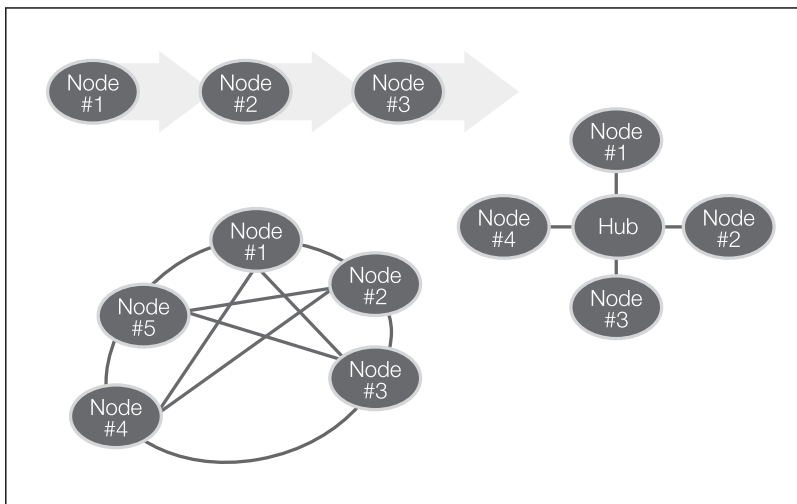


FIGURE 5-1. The basic network shapes described by Evan.

## WHAT ARE ACTIVIST NETWORKS?

Activist networks are comprised of organizations or individual activists that constitute nodes, interconnected by communication and communicative action. Essentially, such communication and action includes the transmission of information, the construction of relationships, the mobilization of resources and bodies, and even the implementation of action in online environments (e.g., Bennett 2003; Castells 1996; 2000). In each of these cases, communication is not the by-product of the network, but rather the driving force that gives rise to mobilization and relationships. These networks can take different shapes, unite individuals and local communities, and often span the entire globe. Such networks can also be grounded in a variety of different forms of communication. Although more recent research has focused almost exclusively on the communication between nodes via the Internet and interactive media platforms, face-to-face communication can be vital to the connections between nodes. In my own experience researching activists, face-to-face communication and relationship building within the physical sites often proves to be just as invaluable (perhaps even more so) as social media and interactive media technologies.

As with the organizations described in chapter 4, there are three primary logistical categories that are integral to the conceptualization of activist networks, regardless of whether the discussion focuses on networks of individuals or organizations: (1) reach, (2) connective media, and (3) levels. The concept of reach is a reference to the number of relationships fostered between nodes within a particular network, as well as connections to other networks. This concept has emerged from studies concerning the ways in which nodes (whether individuals or organizations) come together, build relationships, and see those relationships shaped through strains between nodes. Although there is no “typical” or “ideal” scenario in which nodes reach outward and build relationships with others, studies by Best (2005) and Pickard (2006b) provides good examples of reach and how it functions. Best’s (2005) research concerning the construction of “temporary protest communities” lays out the ways in which some nodes can initially make contact, come together, and become shaped by agonisms between activists. Best demonstrates that an initial organization (or group of activists) puts out a call for some kind of action; this call is usually framed within a narrative or story. According to Pickard (2006b), the narratives typically circulated by activists are quite nebulous; that is, they can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Radical and reformist activists alike can see this call and find that it aligns with their critical worldviews. This enables other activists or organizations to heed the call to action and contact the initial node. At this point, a temporary protest community is established (e.g., Occupy Wall

Street, or a protest against a corporation or free trade policy) and expands as those activists or groups pass on the call and build new relationships with others. Best calls this process of groups and activists coming together around a nebulous, common cause “mesomobilization.” This emergent community is not yet a network, as the different people and groups are rallied together for a short-term goal or purpose. The community is shaped, however, by competing worldviews of activists. Many of the groups or organizations that heeded the original call for action embedded within a nebulous narrative will splinter away from the others because of agonistic differences about tactics. Long-term relationships will remain as long as serious conflicts between these people and groups are avoided; the nodes may engage in future dialogue after the dissolution of the temporary protest community, as long as the agonisms do not become antagonisms. At this point, these groups and people constitute a network, connected by communication codes (Castells 1996). Regardless of whether or not a network came into being through the process of mesomobilization, the reach of the network depends on how far communication from an initial node or set of nodes expanded, the number of relationships built through that communication, and whether relationships remained after the rise of any emergent agonisms between nodes. Relationships between groups will remain as long as the nodes share certain communication codes, such as narratives, ideology, goals, or political affiliations. As other groups or people who share these communication codes come into contact, the reach of the network expands. Whenever any nodes make significant changes to these communication codes, they face the possibility of expulsion from the network (Castells 2000).

The second logistical category involves the media that connect the different nodes of a network: What are the means of communication used by the nodes in order to convey information, build relationships, and mobilize resources? How do the nodes engage in the co-creation of communication and meaning? Researchers have focused on face-to-face communication (e.g., Nadel 1957), as well as connections through Internet tools such as weblogs, listservs, and e-mail (e.g., Arquilla and Ronsfeldt 2001; Hiltz and Turoff 1978; Wellman 1988). These earlier lines of research highlight the ways in which nodes sent messages back and forth among themselves and other networks, which reflects the transmission model of communication (see Berlo 1960). This is significant, as network connections were conceptualized in terms of “stickiness,” as described by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013). Stickiness is the notion that transmitted messages that are interesting to audiences (or nodes) stick to them; the passive audience receives the message, and it sticks to them if it applies to them in any way. The concept of stickiness used to be particularly attractive in the days of one-way broadcast communication (e.g.,

television and radio) and at the forefront of early Internet research (e.g., Hiltz and Turoff 1978).

The connections between nodes via media have become much more complicated in the last decade, however, with the advent of social media that allow for more interactivity and intercreativity than previous Internet platforms. Such platforms do not adhere to the transmission model or concept of “stickiness” like older forms of communication; active users of interactive media move information about networks. Van Dijck (2013, 5) discusses how media such as Facebook and YouTube complicate things: “Until the turn of the millennium, networked media were mostly generic services that you could join or actively utilize to build group, but the service itself would not automatically connect you to others. With the advent of Web 2.0, shortly after the turn of the millennium, online services shifted from offering channels for networked communication to becoming interactive, two-way for networked sociality.” Van Dijck notes that different types of interactive media platforms have emerged in recent years; most notably, social media have been used in public debates and the mobilization of public opinion. Such social media include platforms for social networking such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, as well as platforms for sharing media content such as YouTube or Flickr. The emergence of social media and networks based in these two types of platforms has given rise to what Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) call “spreadable media.” Essentially, interactive media platforms, such as Facebook or YouTube, do not transmit media content that “sticks” to audiences, as in many of the dominant conceptualizations of media (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorelli 1980). Instead, these platforms enable users to spread ideas, narratives, or images throughout their networks. When people post content to their Facebook profiles or YouTube accounts, the content is visible to all of the other nodes within the network without the initial user “transmitting” it to anyone; ideas that are appealing to others in the network will be reposted or “liked” for other nodes to see both across the network and within other networks. Ideas or images that gain popularity or notoriety are spread; users actively read through and select materials within the network for “liking” or reposting.

The notion of spreadable media is particularly important for the current discussion of activist networks, as contemporary activists increasingly use social media platforms in their endeavors. These platforms have become one of the dominant ways in which individual activists and activist organizations interact and build connections to one another. This is not to say, however, that other modes of interconnection are irrelevant, or that the transmission model that dominated earlier network research should be discounted. Much of the research that focused on face-to-face connections (e.g., Evan 1972; Nadel 1957; Wellman

1988) demonstrated that local networks do utilize (and, indeed, rely upon) face-to-face communication for connections between nodes. My own experiences have helped me to understand the importance of face-to-face communication in modern networks. The key to my early research concerning activism was my ability to gain access to activist organizations, particularly peace and antiwar organizations during the Iraq War era. My access to those organizations proved to be invaluable for recruiting interview participants and engaging in ethnography. Of particular importance was a group that I call Peace Alliance (for purposes of anonymity and confidentiality). The Peace Alliance proved to be exceptional in that the organization operated out of a store called the Peace and Justice Cubbyhole (again, a pseudonym); the Cubbyhole was mostly a book store, but also sold organic foods and fair-labor clothing. Hanging out in the Cubbyhole enabled me to meet people and become noticed by members of the organization in ways that would not have been possible if the group had no such site. In addition, activists affiliated with other organizations in town regularly shopped at the Cubbyhole, thus giving rise to interconnections between different groups that probably wouldn't have happened either. Essentially, the different organizations in that area constituted a local network of activism; the different organizations were nodes through which activists could become involved. The physical site of the Peace and Justice Cubbyhole was an integral part of that network, in that it allowed for the Peace Alliance to become an effective hub for the network. Through the physical site, activists from widely different organizations and critical worldviews were able to meet up and interact; such interactions gave rise to feelings of trust among the activists in the network.

Much of the research concerning contemporary global networks, however, has demonstrated that the interconnections are primarily Internet-based platforms (e.g., Huesca 2001; Van Dijk 2012; Van Dijk 2013). This is not to say that local networks are heavily reliant on face-to-face communication and global networks are entirely online; local networks often rely on listservs and e-mail, while many global networks hold annual conventions or retreats in which activists can meet. However, proximity within a community provides many more opportunities for face-to-face contact between activists, which is not a luxury for those activists within global networks. Overall, most contemporary activist networks, whether local or global, are at least partially online; the question for the researcher is how many of the network interconnections are the result of online platforms and how many occur through face-to-face interactions.

The discussion about media connections provides a nice transition into the final logistical category: level. The concept of level denotes whether an activist

network exists within a single localized community or is connected to a higher global network that spans multiple communities; the concept of level also addresses whether the network is online, offline, or partially online. This logistical category has emerged from research that demonstrates that interconnected organizations can exist at multiple levels (e.g., Atkinson 2010; Huesca 2001; Pickard 2006a; 2006b). I have often observed networks that exist purely within local communities, as well as networks that extend beyond local communities and span the globe. Essentially, there are two levels that best describe a network: The network can be solely local, that is, the network is a collection of organizations or activists within a single community with no expansion beyond that point; or the network can exist at the global level, in which case the network is comprised of several nodes linked around the world. Such global networks are typically interconnected with local networks, as the nodes of the former will make connections with local activists and activist organizations in their immediate vicinity.

Note that the following discussion concerning the two levels of networks focuses primarily on organizations as nodes. This is not to say that individual activists are discounted here or do not exist as nodes within these networks. Individuals do exist within these networks, passing information and narratives to and from the larger organizational nodes. Activists as nodes often serve as citizen journalists contributing news and stories to large organizational websites, and they act as liaisons between the global and local levels as they post information from various organizations onto social media platforms. In many ways, the individual activists as nodes play the crucial role of “spreading” information, narratives, and images across networks; the organizations put those materials out into the network, and the individual activists pick up anything that they find to be relevant. Nevertheless, these networks are typically built from multiple grassroots or international organizations.

<b>Recap 5-1. Logistical Categories of Networks</b>	
<b>Category</b>	<b>Type</b>
Reach	The number of relationships fostered between nodes within a particular network, as well as the connections to other networks.
Media	Face-to-face communication. Unidirectional media (e.g., newspaper, radio, television). Interactive (spreadable) media.
Levels	Local networks. Global networks.



Global activist networks are comprised of national and international nodes that have connections into local activist communities. Amnesty International, Indymedia.org, Tea Party Express, and Focus on the Family are organizations that have built connections to other similar global organizations and have established local chapters within communities around the world. The local chapters of these different organizations typically build connections to other organizations (or individual activists as nodes) that share similar worldviews. Because vast distances typically separate nodes in global networks from one another, there is heavy reliance on interactive media platforms; such reliance has led to the all-channel shape (Arquilla and Ronsfeldt 2001; Evan 1972). In other words, global networks include organizations that are often connected to all of the other organizations within the network. If the nodes are not all connected to one another, then there is at least no central hub that controls the interconnected lines of communication; information within these networks is typically free flowing and available to all. Take, for instance, the Tea Party Express, a conservative activist organization that was established in the early days of the presidency of Barack Obama to counter what the activists perceived to be too much government spending. The activists affiliated with the organization described their work in the following way on the Tea Party Express website ([www.teapartyexpress.org/contact](http://www.teapartyexpress.org/contact)): “The Tea Party Express came into existence as the tea party movement was awakened by the famous Rick Santelli rant that swept across the country in February of 2009. This power and influence could not be ignored by the political establishment as the grassroots movement exploded onto the scene. Now, after eight national bus tours and several regional tours that housed over 400 rallies, the Tea Party Express has become nationally recognized for making a difference in critical elections.”

The organization established connections with other prominent national Tea Party groups, such as Tea Party Patriots, and launched local chapters around the United States. The connection between the Tea Party Express and its local chapters, as well as with other national groups such as the Tea Party Patriots, represented a global activist network. Essentially, there was not an established hierarchy in which one organization controlled the flow of information within the network. As one organization made declarations or endorsed political candidates, the information was picked up by all of the other nodes in the network. Any node, whether a “parent” organization, or one of the local chapters, was able to put information into the network that had the potential to “spread” to other nodes. This is not to say that the groups in the network were without their differences, as there were reports about tensions between the Tea Party

Express and the Tea Party Patriots. For instance, David Weigel (2009) reported in the *Washington Independent* that Amy Kremer, one of the chief organizers for the Tea Party Express, originally worked with the Tea Party Patriots; according to Weigel, Kremer was forced out of the Patriots because she helped work with the Express on one of their rallies. Essentially, the two organizations disagreed on the level of support for the Republican Party; Tea Party Express worked to help Republicans (even those they disagreed with), while the Tea Party Patriots wanted to challenge any Republicans who did not adhere to a strict conservative vision. These kinds of agonisms are what ultimately keep organizations within a network from merging into a single unit. Such disagreements cannot become too overwhelming, however, or the network will become dysfunctional and dissolve altogether.

Also of note is that global networks sometimes entail particular sets of rules: manifest rules and latent rules. In many ways, global networks are similar to the organizations mentioned in chapter 4; organizations have surface and deep structures. However, the rules within global networks are much more informal as they do not structure the day-to-day routines of activists in the same way as surface and deep structures of organizations; these rules do not establish leadership or perceptions of right and wrong behavior. Because of agonisms that arise between organizations full mergers rarely happen; the rules never become the powerful surface and deep structures noted in chapter 4. For the most part, these rules are grounded in the binary logic of inclusion and expulsion described by Castells (2000). Essentially, if nodes violate the understood communication codes that bring the network together (e.g., ideology, narratives, political affiliations) they will face the strict penalty of being expelled from the network. As global networks tend to be informal, the emergent rules are merely guidelines that help nodes to navigate any problematic agonisms (or even antagonisms). Nevertheless, these rules can often play an important role in some networks. Both rules have best been demonstrated effectively through Pickard's (2006a; 2006b) research on the Indymedia network. Some of the rules that govern the larger Indymedia global network are manifest, while others are latent. Manifest rules are loose sets of regulations that might be established in the early days of the network. These rules essentially lay out the general guidelines, or codes, for how the different nodes will interact and get along with one another. For instance, Pickard (2006b) demonstrates how the Indymedia network uses rules that dictate a consensus decision-making model, in which all of the nodes in the network have to be in agreement concerning important decisions that need to be made. As noted in chapter 2, when the Ford Foundation offered the network a grant of fifty thousand dollars, a consensus had to be reached among the networks about accepting that money. As one organization had ideological

problems with accepting the grant, the network ultimately rejected it. Conversely, latent rules are those unspoken rules, or codes, that develop within a network; these are similar to the deep structures of organization discussed in chapter 4. In another study on the Indymedia network, Pickard (2006a) reveals such latent rules at work in respect to the publishing of activist news through the Indymedia websites. Pickard found that there are different “tyrannies” that affect the publishing of news on the main Indymedia website: rigid ideologies of activists, elites masked by the lack of structure of the network, and tensions associated with vague editorial policies featured on the main website. These tyrannies mirror the problems of the lack of structure discovered by Jo Freeman (1972) in her examination of radical feminist organizations. These tyrannies serve as latent, or unseen, rules within the network that effectively regulate the content ultimately put onto the main Indymedia news site. Unlike deep structures these latent rules did not motivate the actions of activists, but rather influenced the flow of information through the network.

#### LOCAL ACTIVIST NETWORKS

Local activist networks emerge from the interconnections of individual activists or organizations within a limited geographical region; this region is typically comprised of no more than a single metropolitan area, or a few small cities. Essentially, due to physical proximity and overlapping memberships held by activists across multiple organizations within a region, local networks emerge more organically than those at the global level; familiarity and personal relationships give rise to the interconnections. Unlike global networks that are typically all-channel in form, local networks are usually star shaped. This is due in large part to the connective media that bind the nodes, as many local networks rely heavily on more linear forms of communication; nodes within local networks often utilize face-to-face communication and broadcast forms of media such as community radio, newspapers, and listservs. This is not to say that local networks do not use interactive media platforms, as many activists routinely use social media to keep in contact with other activists in the region. Local networks, however, rely on more than just those interactive media. These star-shaped networks involve a hub connected to several surrounding nodes; the surrounding nodes may have connections to other nearby nodes as well as the hub, but do not usually have connections to all other points in the network. Within this particular form, the hub organization controls much of the information that flows through the network. Most of the information moves one way—from the hub to all of the connected organizations. If peripheral organizations desire to make information available to the rest of the nodes in the

network, the information typically must first pass through the hub; the concept of information transmission and “stickiness” has some relevance at this level.

Of note about local activist networks is the interrelationship between the narrative capacity of the network and the perceived distance between the organizations that are experienced by activists within the network. Both of these concepts emerged from research conducted by myself (Atkinson 2009b; 2010) and in collaboration with Laura Cooley (Atkinson and Cooley 2010). Narrative capacity refers to the ability of the network to effectively circulate narratives and information to different nodes. Typically, local networks rely on one or two media that are widely recognized and used by most activists in the region in order to distribute information between nodes, in addition to personal relationships and face-to-face contact; the hub at the center of the star network often manages and maintains these media. Integral to narrative capacity is whether the other nodes within the network actually know how to use and read the media managed by the hub: Do activists fully understand how the media is accessed? Do they understand how to make use of that media? Are they aware of all of the different media that the hub organization uses? These may seem to be simple questions, but if there is any confusion or misunderstanding on the part of peripheral nodes of the network, there can be negative consequences for cooperation and coordinated resistance, such as protests or demonstrations. If all of the different nodes thoroughly understand how to access and use media managed by the hub, then the network has a high degree of narrative capacity; the different nodes work together and engage in actions effectively. If there is confusion among the different nodes about the media managed by the hub, then there can be drastic breakdowns in trust across the network.

One of my past research projects focuses on two local networks and shows the differences regarding narrative capacity: (a) the Peace Alliance mentioned earlier—which operated out of a store, the “Peace and Justice Cubbyhole,” where many of the activists met and interacted face to face—and (b) the Olive Branch Association (OBA), which I researched later in a different part of the country. The OBA activists did not exhibit the same feelings of trust for other organizations in the local area. In part, such distrust arose because of the hub organization of the network: the OBA did not have a physical site that was open to outsiders. The OBA had an office in a building that was located in one of the harder-to-reach parts of the city; no one from other organizations ever visited that site. Hence, there was very little interaction between the activists from different organizations; each organization felt that they had to fend for themselves in the world. In addition, both networks utilized a one-way listserv managed by the hub, which could only be used by the leaders of those organizations. I found that in the first network all of the activists affiliated with the different nodes understood that the listserv worked this way, and thus the dif-

ferent activists worked well with the Peace Alliance. In the other network, activists mistakenly thought that all could use the listserv; when people could not put information onto the listserv, there was distrust of the OBA. The first network had high narrative capacity, whereas the second demonstrated low narrative capacity.

Narrative capacity ultimately impacts activists' perceptions of closeness or distance from the hub (Atkinson and Cooley 2010). In our collaborative research, Cooley and I found that high narrative capacity allows for narratives and information to pass efficiently through the network. This ensures that vital information about proposed demonstrations, protests, and other such activist events is spread throughout the network. In addition to such information, narratives about what happened at various activist events, as well as news stories from global activist sources (e.g., Amnesty International) can be passed along through the network. We discovered that the effective circulation of information and narratives helps to produce a perception among activists in the network that they are physically "close" to the hub, which stems from feelings of trust among the nodes. That is to say, there is a perception of closeness to the hub of the network when narrative capacity is high. Conversely, low narrative capacity can lead to a perception among the nodes of greater "distance" from the hub. When activists in the network do not fully understand how to access or use any media that is used to circulate information and narratives, distrust or frustration with the hub can emerge. Such feelings can create a gulf between the peripheral nodes and the hub, which is perceived as a physical distance. This is particularly problematic as those peripheral nodes rely on the hub for their connection to all of the other nodes in the network.

Effective narrative capacity and perceived closeness to any hub organization are essentially the glue that holds a local network together. Without high narrative capacity, activists affiliated with different nodes within the network feel distant from the hub; they may distrust the hub or view any leadership associated with a hub as unreliable. Ultimately, all of this can be problematic for the mesomobilization described by Best (2005), as well as the co-performance of resistance illustrated by my own research (Atkinson 2010). Whenever there is distrust or frustration with the hub, activists have little incentive to become involved in protests or actions that are called for by the hub. In the network with high narrative capacity that Cooley and I investigated, all of the activists across the entire network respected the Peace Alliance, even if they held different worldviews than the leadership of the organization. Whenever information was put out into the network by that hub organization, activists affiliated with different nodes trusted the information. Whenever the hub called for protests or demonstrations, the other nodes in the network quickly answered the call in the affirmative. In the local network with low narrative capacity, however, we

found “fractures” that hindered the emergence of coordinated resistance by the different nodes in the region. Whenever the OBA called for protests or actions, many activists questioned the motivations for such a call. In many cases, nodes ignored the calls for action altogether.

Activist networks are comprised of their reach, levels, and connective media. These three logistical categories are intertwined, as the type of media can often influence the reach; the reach of the network, in turn, can influence the levels at which the network exists. The reach of the network entails the number of nodes and the interconnections between those nodes. The broader the reach of the network, the more likely it is that the network exists at multiple levels. In addition, the logistical concepts of organizations noted in chapter 2 (worldview of activists, organizational structure) are integral for the conceptualization of those networks that are comprised of organizations as the primary nodes. Those organizations in the network that have strong surface structures are more likely to build connections to other organizations and thus become part of wide-spanning networks. Organizations that have little in the way of surface structure, such as the Church of Stop Shopping, cannot effectively build connections—not because they do not fit within a network, but because they may not be able to build connections to many other organizations. Such organizations become nodes within networks that are narrow in terms of reach and do not effectively connect at the global level.

Overall, global and local networks are important sites in which activism can be observed and studied. Much of the research within this site has focused on, and been constrained by, the different logistical categories noted earlier. The question for the qualitative researcher is how to approach the research site? In many ways, the study of networks is similar to the cross-section approach to the study of organizations discussed in chapter 4, as networks are often comprised of a multitude of nodes (whether individual activists or organizations). With that in mind, researchers can approach the network from the outside, or they may explore it from within. The external approach to the study of networks has typically been accomplished by researchers through the use of qualitative content analysis of media texts such as zines, newspapers, listservs, Facebook profiles, and YouTube videos to name just a few. Research of activist networks from within has been accomplished with the help of interviews and focus groups, ethnographic fieldwork, as well as qualitative content analysis. Many of the issues described in chapter 4—such as recruitment e-mails and interview questions used by DeTurk (2011)—also pertain to the internal approach whenever researchers are exploring organizations that are nodes of an activist networks; there is significant overlap between these research sites. The following sections explore the ways in which specific qualitative methods have

been carried out and highlight good practices for researchers as they engage in their own qualitative investigations of activist networks.

#### THE EXTERNAL APPROACH TO ACTIVIST NETWORKS

Researchers who have engaged in the external approach to networks have typically relied on qualitative content analysis as the primary means to accomplish their goals. When using this approach, researchers are essentially on the outside looking inward at the communication and communicative actions of activists within their network; such communication within a network constitutes a text ripe for examination and analysis. It makes sense that researchers rely on textual analysis rather than interview data or observations from participant observation; on the outside, the opportunities to recruit and interact with activists do not exist. Texts become the means by which researchers can effectively gauge issues such as reach, connective media, or levels. There are definite limitations to this approach, as researchers rely solely on their own reading and observations of the texts under analysis; without interviews or fieldwork it can be difficult to verify or corroborate data. However, the external approach enables researchers to quickly and efficiently scour an entire network within a relatively short period of time; in fact, it is quite possible for researchers to examine multiple intertwining and overlapping activist networks. In contrast, the internal approach, discussed shortly, does not allow for such a broad scope within a similarly constrained time period.

Research by Russell (2005), Liesbet Van Zoonen, Farida Vis, and Sabina Mihelj (2010), Melissa Loudon (2010), and Harlow (2011) provides good examples of the external approach to the study of singular networks, or networks with a single hub. David Zimbra, Hsinchun Chen, and Ahmed Abassi (2010) expand on these projects and demonstrate ways in which researchers can observe and explore multiple networks or where network hubs intersect. Russell's research explores the ways in which different websites and online media helped to structure relationships within the Zapatista network (see chapter 4). Ultimately, the analysis of these texts helped to demonstrate different myths that were circulated by nodes in the network: the noble savage, a romanticized vision of Subcomandante Marcos, and neoliberalism as an evil beast. Taken together, these myths structured the ways in which different nodes interacted and thus held important implications for the formation of identity within the network. Van Zoonen, Vis, and Mihelj look at activist vlogging networks on YouTube that emerged after the release of the anti-Islamic film *Fitna* in 2008. Produced by Geert Wilders, a member of the Dutch Parliament, the

film intertwines verses of the Quran with footage of terrorist acts to portray Islam as violent and fanatical. Responses to the film quickly emerged on YouTube; many activists decried the negative portrayal, while others voiced their support. The emergent network stood as a clash between different nodes. When analyzing the YouTube vlog posts, the researchers noted different performances of citizenship: apologies to Muslims for the work of Wilder, deconstruction of the anti-Islamic message, parodies and satire, and testimonials about the peaceful or violent nature of Islam. Loudon's research explored the activist network that emerged from the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) in South Africa; the campaign was focused primarily on raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, as well as providing medical aid to afflicted people. The network was comprised of a hub organization that served as the national headquarters, along with several branch organizations around the country. Essentially, Loudon's analysis of texts enabled her to demonstrate the role of different ICTs in accomplishing different goals for the network. Specifically, her research shows that interactive media platforms and mobile phones were an integral component of mobilization in the network, while Internet tools such as e-mail and mailing lists were essential for expanding the reach of the network and connecting the global to the local. Harlow explores the role of Facebook in the construction of an activist network in Guatemala and across Central America and focuses on activists' efforts following the murder of Guatemalan lawyer Rodrigo Rosenberg, who blamed his demise on the president of Guatemala in a posthumously released video. The content of the video angered many in the region and led to the creation of Facebook profiles, fan pages, and groups that featured Rosenberg; the platform was essentially used by these activists to call for investigations into the lawyer's death, as well as the resignation of the president. Through her analysis of Facebook sites, Harlow demonstrates that the commentaries posted by readers on profiles were framed in such a way to prompt other activists to "like" the effort so that word concerning this issue would spread; "liking" the comments allowed for the reach of the network to expand.

These three projects provide insight into two vital steps for carrying out qualitative content analysis in the external approach: the generation of representative samples and modes of analysis. The research conducted by Van Zoonen, Vis, and Mihelj addresses the first of these steps: the qualitative content analysis of videos uploaded to YouTube from February to May 2008 and their corresponding vlogs. The researchers were able to effectively generate a representative sample of these vlogs that was both large and manageable. This is particularly important as nodes within networks (organizations and individuals alike) can often generate thousands of observable texts through commentaries, blog posts, websites, and images. Their initial keyword search



concerning the film *Fitna* on YouTube returned 6,000 results; this number was far too large for an efficient analysis. Part of the problem was due to the fact that many videos uploaded by YouTube users are actually “double-counts,” or videos that are uploaded by multiple users; hence, a single video appears in a keyword search several times. To counter this problem, the researchers used multiple keywords to conduct the search, such as “Fitna Wilders” or “Fitna Muslim.” This cut the number of returns to 1,400; a smaller number, but still not manageable. Van Zoonen, Vis, and Mihelj solved the problem with the aid of Mike Thelwall of the Statistical Cybermetrics Research Group in the United Kingdom. Working with Thelwall the researchers developed an e-research tool called Webometric Analyst, which is free and available for download through the Statistical Cybermetrics Research Group website (<http://lexiurl.wlv.ac.uk>). This e-research tool prevented double-counts by coding all of the data that emerged for country of origin, date of upload, and other factors that were registered by the person who uploaded a video; the program focuses on users as well as other factors such as keywords or how frequently a site is accessed. In a separate research proceeding in which Webometric Analyst was used, Mike Thelwall, Pardeep Sud, and Farida Vis (2011, 6) note the following about this approach to searching for web content: “This method produces lists of users rather than lists of videos, however, and is very resource-intensive because it needs to cover a high proportion of the network of users to avoid biases caused by the snowball-type method used . . . it produces unknown proportions of popular and unpopular videos and so matches neither the videos viewed by users nor the videos posted by users.” This is not to say that the researchers were not searching for keywords by using this program, but rather expanding the parameters of the search so as to filter double-counted videos. In addition to user-oriented parameters associated with the Webometrics program, the researchers also used time parameters in their keyword search; they searched only for those keyword combinations within the months of February, March, April, and May 2008, which were the months following the release of the film on YouTube. The search for keyword combinations within these time parameters, along with the use of Webometrics, generated 776 videos for analysis, which was considerably more manageable than the 6,000 videos from the initial search.

Russell in her work on the Zapatista network identity uses an inductive qualitative content analysis of a variety of online media, while Loudon’s uses deductive analysis in her research concerning TAC websites. Russell examined seven subscriber listservs that were used to circulate information about the Zapatistas, as well as “thousands” of websites dedicated to covering the Zapatista movement and autonomous communities; the nodes in this network were individuals acting independently, as well as organizations dedicated to aiding the

Zapatistas. The listservs that she examined were: Chiapas-L, Chiapas95, EZLN-info, Jovenes and Jovenes-d, Peacenet, Zap e-mail, and Zapatismo. The messages disseminated from these six listservs provided links and references to all of the other “thousands” of websites that were also included in Russell’s analysis. Essentially, the listservs and websites stood as the lines of communication that interconnected the different nodes of this all-channel global network. The qualitative content analysis was inductive in nature, as Russell let categories emerge from the texts under examination. In her research, she utilized Barthes’s (1972; 1977) concept of myth and its relation to narrative, as well as different narrative components (e.g., characters, settings), to guide her close reading of the texts and construct categories. Russell moved through listserv postings and websites noting different narrative components within each. She was then able to take all of the different narrative components that had been identified and compare them to one another. As she sorted through the different narrative components, recording similarities and differences among them, three categorical myths began to emerge; the different ways in which the narrative components were utilized across the various texts gave rise to these categories. These myths were the dominant portrayals of the Zapatistas and their community circulated among the nodes of the network. In contrast, Loudon engaged in a deductive qualitative content analysis, in which concepts were utilized as a framework for the study of texts. In her research, Loudon examined the TAC websites, as well as documents produced by the national organization and local chapters. Once she had collected all of the texts produced by those nodes for her research, she employed the comparative framework of social movement theories (see McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996) as a lens through which she examined each in turn. The concept of comparative framework of social movements states that there are three theoretical perspectives for understanding social movement media: the mobilization of resources (i.e., gaining monetary contributions), opportunity structures (i.e., connections to political systems), and the framing of processes (i.e., shaping an understanding of the world). Loudon used this concept as she read through the texts; she identified key information that passed through the network and determined whether the information fit into one of the three predetermined categories noted above. This enabled her to identify the media platforms utilized to relay different kinds of information (mobilization of resources, opportunity structures, or framing) within the network of TAC organizations. The key difference between the work of Russell and Loudon is that the first used theory to guide the reading and allowed categories to emerge directly from the text, while the second applied three categories to the text and sorted elements out into them.

Harlow’s qualitative content analysis of activists’ Facebook profiles in support of Rodrigo Rosenberg was more elaborate than the analyses conducted by

Russell and Loudon. In this case, Harlow engaged in multiple deductive analyses of all of the texts and also utilized an inductive analysis. In order to conduct each of these analyses, she enlisted the aid of four bilingual coders who engaged in readings of the texts with her. The group read through the texts and compared their categorization of different comments posted on the profiles; such comparison allowed for the establishment of intercoder reliability. In terms of the deductive analysis, the group applied the concept of collective action frames (see Gerhards and Rucht 1992), as well as thematic frames (see Matthes 2009; Noakes and Johnston 2005) to guide their readings of the texts; both of these concepts had been established in past literature concerning activist media. In the first deductive application, Harlow and the coders searched through comments that had been posted on Facebook profiles and placed them into one of three collective action frames that had been developed in past research: “diagnostic (How did the comment define the problem?), prognostic (What solutions were suggested?) or motivational (Was the comment a call to arms or motivating?)” (Harlow 2012, 232). As they combed through the texts, they read each comment on the Facebook profiles and determined the action that they seemed to convey; comments were categorized according to one of the collective action frames. For the second deductive application, the group reexamined the texts in order to place activists’ commentary within different thematic frames: “An agency frame (related to participating or inciting action), a values frame (related to high-level abstraction of ideals of justice, democracy, national security, patriotism, familial safety, or good of the community), an adversarial frame (portraying the movement as good versus evil, or specifying heroes and villains), a reflective frame (related to discussions of antecedents, consequences, or media coverage), or other” (ibid.).

The process in this second deductive analysis progressed in the same manner as the first. That is, the concept of thematic frames was used as a lens to read and examine the text. The group categorized each profile commentary related to Rodrigo Rosenberg as one of the four thematic frames. Once Harlow and the coders had completed the coding, comparisons were made concerning the categorization of Facebook comments; Holsti’s formula was calculated, which revealed an intercoder reliability of 90 percent. Both of these deductive analyses allowed for Harlow to pinpoint the ways in which the activists made use of Facebook within this network. In addition to the deductive analysis, they also engaged in inductive analysis of the postings. Essentially, she used one of the guiding research questions for the study as a frame for searching through the texts once more: what kind of material ultimately emerged from the Facebook postings by activists? This approach called for the researcher to compare and contrast different postings, ultimately building categories that defined what meanings and topics were embedded within. In this way, Harlow was able to

demonstrate eight categories that emerged from her analysis of the comments posted on the Facebook profiles by activists: protest-related material, antipresident and antigovernment comments, requests to sign petitions, discussions about media coverage, calls for justice, calls for solidarity with Guatemala, and materials related to Facebook among other types of comments. Overall, the multiple qualitative content analyses in the project provided Harlow with a comprehensive view of how activists made use of Facebook within this network.

In addition, the external approach to the study of activist networks can also help scholars to explore hub-to-hub interconnections, or intersections between different activist networks. In their research concerning websites and interconnected activist groups, Zimbra, Chen, and Abassi (2010) developed a form of network analysis that can aid in mapping networks and observing where network hubs intersect; they termed this method “cyber-archaeology.” This method for content analysis was demonstrated in their research concerning violent anti-Western activism in the Middle East; specifically, they explored websites used by activists to disseminate information about the construction of improvised exploding devices (IEDs). The research not only illustrated a large network of websites for the circulation of technical information about the construction of IEDs, but also found three separate hubs that were interconnected by different websites. Essentially, they noted that there were three stages involved in this process of cyber-archaeology: social movement research design, collection and classification of artifacts, and visualization and analysis of the network. The first stage involves intensive research concerning a particular social movement and identification of key groups. In addition, this stage requires that the researcher identify important online texts that are utilized by these groups. The second stage of cyber-archaeology requires that the researcher pull together a body of texts from the key groups and classify them. Researchers can use preexisting theories or categories to code the texts, or they may develop categories that are specific to their research. Essentially, these first two stages are similar to the processes of qualitative content analysis described earlier in this chapter.

The third stage of cyber-archaeology involves both building a map of all of the different artifacts (typically websites or other web materials) and then illustrating the links between them. During the first part of this stage, the researcher looks at the intensity of communication associated with different classifications of artifacts. Intensity can entail looking at the number of times the artifact was accessed, the frequency of commentary, or the scope of artifacts. In their research, Zimbra, Chen, and Abassi (2010, 64) looked at the number of pages for websites about IEDs in order to help establish intensity: “These site maps are indicative of the communication patterns of the participants, showing where within their virtual community these issues are being discussed and

specific IED-related resources mobilized.” Essentially, this provides insight into which artifacts interest activists more, or shows those artifacts that are used more often. In order to accomplish this task, the researcher can build one map with all of the artifacts laid out. Color-coding or numbers can be used to indicate classification of the artifacts and intensity; such was the case in Zimbira, Chen, and Abassi’s research, as they color-coded websites according to classifications and used numbers to indicate intensity of those sites. The next part of this stage entails demonstrating the connections between artifacts and effectively making a network (and interconnections between networks) visible. Zimbira, Chen, and Abassi looked at the hyperlinks on websites to determine if there were connections between sites; in their map they drew lines between different nodes so as to represent connections between different IED-related websites. In addition to links to websites, researchers can also look for common references or citations in order to demonstrate connections that exist between artifacts. Adding these lines to the classified artifacts helps to illustrate interconnections between nodes and demonstrates what types of resources are shared. These lines also help to demonstrate how resources move from one network to another.

Ultimately, qualitative content analysis has proven integral in the external approach to the study of activist networks. The examples reviewed here provide insight about the generation of representative samples from enormous bodies of texts, as well as ways in which deductive and inductive analysis can be used to uncover meanings and topics within texts. In reference to the first, Van Zoonen, Vis, and Mihelj’s research is important as it provides some ideas about how to collect representative samples when dealing with interactive media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter), which can spawn enormous amounts of texts produced by a multitude of users in short amounts of time. The research of Russell, Loudon, and Harlow provides insight about how to actually conduct analysis of texts whenever they are finally identified and collected. This is not to say that other methods are not useful; indeed, multiple methods can help to supplement the qualitative content analysis and offset the limitations noted earlier in this section. Harlow engaged in survey interviews with four creators of the Facebook profiles that addressed the murder of Rodrigo Rosenberg; the interviews enabled her to build a better understanding of the types of activists who were engaged in this networking activity. In addition, Loudon was able to engage in participant observations regarding the connections between TAC and a group called Cell-Life, an organization to which she had some connections; her observation of encounters between Cell-Life and the TAC network enabled her to see ICTs in action. However, these methods were supplemental, at best, as they did not provide additional insight into the networks, but rather helped to corroborate findings from the textual

### **Recap 5-2. External Approach to the Study of Activist Networks**

- Is useful for examinations of interconnections across large networks, as well as interconnections between networks.
- Uses qualitative content analysis as the primary method.
- Cyber-archaeology can be used to provide insight into interconnections between multiple activist networks.

analysis. In short, supplemental qualitative methods can (and even should) be used as a means for verifying findings that emerge from the primary content analysis of websites, videos, social networking profiles, and other interconnections within networks.

### THE INTERNAL APPROACH TO ACTIVIST NETWORKS

Research that takes the approach of exploring activist networks from within has typically relied heavily on interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic practices such as participant observation. This internal approach enables researchers to explore and examine networks in the same way that they might study organizations (see chapter 4); essentially, researchers can perform a focused or cross-section examination. In cases of a focused examination, researchers typically employ the use of participant observation or other forms of fieldwork in order to thoroughly explore and describe one or two nodes within a network. While closely observing (or working with) one or two nodes, researchers can fully discern interconnections to other nodes by way of reach and level. Conversely, researchers can also examine a cross-section of nodes within a network; such a mode of research does not garner as much detailed information about specific nodes, but it provides insight about reach and level across an entire network. Overall, the first mode of research provides rich detail about a few nodes, while the latter allows for expansive information about an entire network (or multiple networks).

Projects by Theresa Petray (2011), Natalie Fenton and Veronica Barassi (2011), Clarissa David (2013), and Cooley and myself (Atkinson and Cooley 2010) all serve as solid examples of this approach to activist networks. My work with Cooley explores the ways in which activist interactions and alternative media affected the shape of local networks. We examined two different networks in different parts of the United States and assessed the communication between activists, as well as the modes of communication between different organizations in the communities. Essentially, we demonstrate that both networks relied heavily on some alternative media (in the form of listservs

within both sites) to coordinate all of the different organizational nodes; the organization that maintained the mediated platform in each case was considered to be the hub of the network. In one network, all of the activists fully understood how to operate and take part in using the platform, so they perceived the hub to be fair; the network took on the shape of a symmetrical star. In the other network, there was a lot of confusion about how the mediated platform was operated, so the hub was perceived as deceptive; the network took on an elongated star shape as many nodes described a sense of distance from the hub. Petray's research explored the use of Internet-based platforms, such as e-mail and Facebook, in a local aboriginal rights network in Townsville, Queensland, in Australia; in particular, Petray worked closely with the Townsville Indigenous Human Rights Group (TIHRG). The activists in Townsville worked to raise awareness about the stark gaps between aboriginal people in Australia and the dominant white population; aborigines suffer from lower life expectancies, education, and incomes. Activists had worked to address these issues for decades, but had most recently adopted Internet-based platforms to aid in their endeavors. Petray demonstrates that such interactive media allowed for more expansive networks, as well as opportunities for those networks to make their case to state agencies and the general public. However, the use of Internet-based platforms as a primary form of networking within a local community also held negative implications, as attendance at demonstrations and marches declined significantly; the online networking stood in for actions in physical sites. Fenton and Barassi's research also explores Internet-based platforms, but focuses on a global network that spanned Great Britain. Specifically, they explored the role of Facebook and Twitter by the Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC), an organization strongly aligned with labor organizations around the United Kingdom. Essentially, the CSC works to build bridges between Cuban workers and trade unions, as well as labor activists, across the British Isles. In recent years, the group established a Facebook profile and Twitter feed so that they could circulate information more efficiently, as well as expand their network as activists joined or "liked" the group. Fenton and Barassi noted, however, that this mode of networking was somewhat problematic for CSC, as much of the information that was contributed by activists through these platforms was self-centered and self-promotion. That is, activists who made use of the CSC Facebook and Twitter feed did not contribute important information or narratives about Cuba or trade unions, but rather info about themselves to bolster their own reputation or image. In contrast, David's research explores the ways in which interactive media platforms have helped activists to become more politically engaged. David examined the use of ICTs by young people in the Philippines; she did not focus on a specific set of activist groups that made up this particular net-

work, nor a network that addressed any particular issues. Instead, she looked at Filipino youth who had maintained some form of activism, online or off, over time. This enabled her to examine the ways in which ICTs, such as social networking sites and mobile phones, allowed for the emergence of politically engaged networks among youth. The research ultimately demonstrated that the use of such interactive media gave rise to more connections between activists and subsequently lead to increased political activity and digital forms of political engagement.

The research projects noted in this section are important as they provide insights into both the focused exploration of specific nodes and cross-section examination of nodes across entire networks. Fenton and Barassi's research, as well as Petray's, are examples of the focused exploration of specific nodes, as these projects explore one single organization (and its local chapters spread out throughout the country) within a larger network. In both of these instances, the researchers relied heavily on participant observations that were supplemented by additional qualitative methods. In the case of Fenton and Barassi, the researchers explored a set of related nodes and their interconnections with trade unions and political parties across the United Kingdom; their focused examination provides detailed insight into the reach, level, and media of CSC organizations. To achieve their goals, Fenton and Barassi underwent an all-encompassing yearlong ethnography that entailed participant observation, informal interviews with CSC activists, and qualitative content analysis of media prepared by the CSC. The participant observation was most important, as it put the researchers in the middle of events that connected the CSC to other organizations: "The 1-year-long ethnographic project involved volunteering on a daily basis in the national office of the CSC, participating in trade union conferences and events, and following CSC members and organizations to social gatherings and activities in a variety of different ethnographic spaces" (Fenton and Barassi 2011, 184). This enabled Fenton and Barassi to witness and experience the interactions and relationships that constituted the reach of the CSC to local chapters, as well as other global organizations and nodes. The participant observation allowed them to witness events and face-to-face interactions between CSC members and activists from trade unions and political parties, as well as take part in those interactions. More importantly, they had access to the Facebook profile and Twitter feed and were able to witness the activists use the information circulated by those platforms in offline face-to-face interactions. As they worked with the interactive media of the organization, they were in an excellent position to receive feedback from activists concerning messages and formatting of interactive platforms, as well as observe how people discussed those items at meetings or in less formal conversations. Overall, the participant observation allowed for a deep, rich understanding of



different media used to establish and maintain the reach of the node into the network at multiple levels.

The other aspects of Fenton and Barassi's ethnography, informal interviews and qualitative content analysis, were utilized to supplement the information that the researchers gleaned from their work among the CSC activists and observations of the organization; this approach enabled them to uncover elements related to reach, level, and media that were not easily observable or involved in the Internet-based interactions and organizational events in which they took part. The participant observations allowed for informal interviews to emerge organically. The frequency of their attendance at organizational events and social gatherings enabled them to build a rapport with CSC activists at the national headquarters and local chapters, as well as with some members of the trade unions with which the CSC was connected. Overall, thirty-seven activists engaged in the interviews, which were postmodern in nature. The questions that Fenton and Barassi asked during the course of these interviews typically focused on the participants' history of activism and life within the CSC. The information from these informal interviews helped the researchers to understand the context of many of the interactions that they observed taking place throughout the network, as well as the use of the Facebook profile and Twitter feed by activists. Their qualitative content analysis explored media produced by the CSC national organization, as well as the local chapters. Essentially, Fenton and Barassi examined the magazine published by the organization (*CubaSi*), websites developed by the main organization and local chapters, e-mail listservs, and the newly launched Facebook profile and Twitter feed. Their analysis is inductive in nature, as the researchers worked through the texts in close readings searching for themes and concepts that helped them to address their guiding research questions. In this way, themes within the different forms of media emerged that provided additional insight into the use of social media and other interactive media platforms in the reach of the network.

In the case of Petray's research, the focus was on one organization within a local network and its connection to other organizations. The research was accomplished through the use of participant observation. In this case, Petray engaged in participatory activism (see chapter 4); essentially, she worked alongside the activists of TIHRG to raise awareness about the plight of many of the aboriginal people of Australia and advocated on their behalf. In this particular case, Petray attended meetings and events that were organized by TIHRG between 2007 and 2009; the meetings were a safe space in which activists from different organizations, as well as concerned citizens, came together to discuss problems and solutions in the region. In addition, Petray also traveled to different communities close to Townsville and visited organizations that were similar to TIHRG (e.g., Palm Island, Ingram). Her involvement in TIHRG

meetings and events (as well as her visits to nearby communities and organizations) allowed her to observe activists interacting; it also gave rise to informal interviews that emerged organically from her proximity to the group. Such interviews followed a postmodern format and focused on networking, the use of different media, and each activist's involvement in protests and other actions. As in the case of Fenton and Barassi, the observations and informal interviews with activists provided Petray with insight into the interconnections between TIHRG and other nodes in this local network. Overall, the focused examination of the one node allowed for a thorough understanding about how Internet-based platforms affected participation of activists within their own corner of the network.

In the case of David and my own research alongside Cooley, the researchers engaged in cross-section examinations of nodes across one or more networks. These projects employed interviews and focus groups in order to collect data about multiple nodes. I engaged in postmodern interviews with activists across two local networks in the United States. Essentially, these networks were comprised of organizations that were dedicated to peace and justice and staged several protests against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; these networks were interconnected by different alternative media platforms, such as listservs and activist-produced newspapers. In each site, I engaged in snow-ball sampling to recruit activists for postmodern interviews; I asked each participant whether they knew other activists in the region who they thought would be willing to engage in the one-hour interview process, regardless of organizational affiliation or the focus of their activism. This enabled Cooley and I to collect a significant cross-section of each network; twenty-seven activists were identified and interviewed in one site, twenty in the other. Overall, these activists were affiliated with numerous nodes across both local networks; the interviews addressed a variety of topics:

The interviews allowed the activists in the research to describe their opinions about social justice and corporations (e.g., Has enough been done by the local government to reform corporations?), their opinions about new social movement networks (e.g., Do you see any collaborative efforts between social justice organizations? If so, provide examples), their role in new social movement networks (e.g., Tell me about the social justice organizations of which you are a member), their interactions with other activists (e.g., Do you ever interact with alternative media producers in Erie City?), and their use of alternative media (e.g., Do you use any alternative media sources? If so, what are the titles of those sources?). (Atkinson and Cooley 2010, 327)

The questions that were asked of the different activists were general enough to allow for the weaving of narratives about two particular things: the nodes of the network and the media that was used to interconnect nodes. Overall, these questions provided insight about the reach of the network, as well as the connective media used to bind the networks.

David's research similarly recruited a wide array of activists across a network of Filipino youth activists. The activists were contacted via e-mail and social networking sites and in face-to-face discussions. Rather than relying on interviews, as in the case noted earlier, David also engaged in focus groups with some of the participants. Essentially, she collected two different types of participants for the research: activists who were heavily involved in politics and nonactivists who had described their political engagement as "normal." In the case of the first, she approached political bloggers, members of regional activist organizations, and university-based political organizations. Overall, twenty-nine activists engaged in survey interviews in which they were asked about their use of ICTs to communicate with other activists and collect news, as well as information about their participation in activist and political events. The nonactivists were recruited from university classes and asked to take part in a study that involved discussion about political activities. The students who offered to take part in the research were split into eight focus groups, with a total of eighty-seven participants overall; the focus groups utilized the same survey questions that were asked of activists in the interviews. The use of interviews coupled with focus groups illustrates the different types of media and news information that were used or consumed by the different participants in the study. More importantly, these methods of research allowed for the collection of perspectives and knowledge grounded in different distinct positions, which provided additional insight into the reach, levels, and media related to the network. The interviews enabled David to thoroughly illustrate the use of media by the activists and to gain insight into the reach and connective media within these networks. The focus groups enabled her to collect broad data about individuals who were not politically motivated or involved in the same ways as the activists; data from both sets provided an excellent opportunity to compare and contrast activists and nonactivists.

Overall, the internal approach to the study of activist networks connects to many of the lessons conveyed in chapter 4. Essentially, researchers may engage in a focused examination of a few nodes within a network, or look at a cross-section of an entire network. Many of the pros and cons, benefits, and limitations covered in the previous chapter for both approaches easily apply here as well. The focused examination of one or two nodes within a network can tell much about how those nodes establish and maintain reach, but less about the

### **Recap 5-3. Internal Approach to the Study of Activist Networks**

- Makes it possible to engage in a focused or cross-section examination from within the network:
  - Focused research reveals establishment and maintenance of reach by specific nodes.
  - Cross-section research demonstrates the interconnection of nodes.
- Relies on ethnographic methods and interviews.

concept of reach across the entire network (or across multiple levels). The cross-section examination within a network can illustrate much about the expanse of a network and how the nodes are interconnected, but provide less insight about activists' work maintaining such interactions. Despite these limitations, the internal approach provides a first-hand view into activist networks, which accounts for a more accurate picture of reach, level, and connective media than what can come from the external approach. Researchers can tap into the knowledge and experience of activists who are deeply involved in the flow of information and communication between nodes; researchers may even experience this flow for themselves.

#### SUMMARY

This chapter defines the research site of activist networks in terms of three key logistical categories that have emerged in past research: reach, connective media, and level. These three categories are not the only characteristics that are associated with activist networks. Lateral rules, narrative capacity, and the perceptions of physical closeness or distance can all arise as important components as well. The key logistical categories are present within all networks, however, and are intricately intertwined. Without reach or connective media, networks simply do not exist at any level. As qualitative researchers formulate their research questions and research design, they will need to take into account these three categories, as well as the other concepts mentioned here.

The chapter also explores different qualitative methods that have typically been employed in the study of activist networks. Essentially, there are two approaches that can be taken in order to conduct research within this site: the external and internal approaches. The external approach can be more efficient of the two, particularly when time is a significant constraint for the researcher. In this approach, the researcher can engage in qualitative content analysis of documents produced by different nodes in a network in order to get a basic understanding of the reach, connective media, and extent to different levels. The internal approach to the study of activist networks can prove to be much

more time consuming and typically does not allow for as broad a view of a network as the external approach. Nevertheless, qualitative researchers who have used participatory observation, interviews, and focus groups have had success in creating rich detailed descriptions of specific nodes within activist networks.

Ultimately, any of the methods covered in chapter 3 can be used to explore activist networks. Rhetorical criticism could be used to accomplish the external approach, and ethnographic narrative excavation could be used for the internal approach (within certain parameters). The methods noted in this chapter have been used most often in qualitative inquiries concerning activist networks and have proven to be useful in gathering data and building on literature. Researchers have had considerable success using the methods detailed in this chapter to make significant contributions to the literature concerning activism.