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Introduction

Transnational networks of advocacy organisations shape the ongoing social and political process that is globalization – contesting global policy decisions and posing alternative possibilities (e.g. Chandler, 2004; Eschle and Stammers, 2004; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Their influence has been well established, from human rights to labour standards and education policy (Fox, 2002; Carpenter, 2006; Brooks, 2007; Mundy and Murphy, 2001). Some commentators have even described such networks as a form of 'world society', producing many of the norms which have come to structure global politics (e.g. sustainable development and, more historically, anti-slavery) (Clark, 2007).

The article focuses on a frequently used but under-researched media through which these coalitions express their collective demands – what are termed here as 'Global Group Petitions' (GGPs). GGPs are online petitions typically framed as 'global', linking sometimes hundreds of advocacy groups behind a common set of critical statements targeting an institution of global governance. These petitions have become an established form of protest media within the political strategies utilized by transnational movement networks. As the article demonstrates, GGPs deserve new research because, first, they provide new opportunity for better understanding the relationship between online digital media and transnational movement networks. And, second, GGPs signal a key site in which contemporary global society is shaped – a political process in which dominant members of transnational movement networks contest the meaning of their joint activity.

Despite there existing a substantial body of literature identifying the role of digital media within transnational coalitions of advocacy groups (Kavada, 2010; Juris, 2005; 2008; Della Porta and Mosca, 2005; Rolfe, 2005), there is a significant absence when it comes to this specific form of global political activism. As will be argued in the first section, global group petitions are both a political tool and a political process involving potentially highly-contentious negotiations between diverse interests. Developing a detailed definition that is illustrated with examples of recent global group petitions, the article explains why the GGP term is chosen over activists' own description of these petitions as either 'sign-on statements' or 'joint statements'. As will be shown, studying GGPs advances understanding of the political process through which members of transnational movement networks construct their joint activity.

Demonstrating how GGPs emerge and function, the article turns to empirical analysis and interviews with activists relating to five such petitions that emerged during the lifetime of one particular global campaign – critical of negotiations to expand the World Trade Organization's (WTO) General Agreement on Trade-in-Services (GATS). Focusing on one particular campaign

allows both comparison between the respective role of each GGP, as well as the political process behind their formation.

The article concludes by stating that whilst GGPs are not as 'global' or representative of a network as they may claim, their value is in facilitating momentum and a process of dialogue between potential advocacy partners. In developing this argument, the article contributes to social science on new media, advocacy coalitions and global politics by studying a unique form of online global activism that remains grossly under-researched within current literature.

Defining Global Group Petitions (GGPs)

What this article calls 'Global Group Petitions' (GGPs) – and activists themselves label 'sign-on statements' or 'joint statements' – are an increasingly visible but under-researched media through which transnational movement networks communicate their collective identity. Networks of advocacy groups that cross national borders have become recognised as bringing both new actors and interests to global politics (Bandy and Smith, 2005; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Chandler, 2004; Eschle and Stammers, 2004). It is through an interactive process that activists identify their campaign target/s and develop a common vocabulary by which the network actors may frame their collective action (Choup, 2008; Snow and Benford, 2000; Carty and Onyett, 2006: 234-236). As the article shows, GGPs have served as a key media through which advocacy group communicate with one another to construct their common activity.

The GGP term is introduced here for its analytical value in isolating what is a unique form of political media, as the article demonstrates, exhibiting combined characteristics not captured by activists' own terminology or existing literature. GGPs are defined in the article as petitions published online linking often hundreds of advocacy groups within a common project of 'global' solidarity. In other words, GGPs are characterised by three core criteria. First, GGPs present a narrative in which their signatories are united in 'global' solidarity. Second, GGPs link often hundreds of advocacy groups as signatories. Third, whilst a GGP may be later printed in paper form, it remains an initially electronic media published online. The GGPs discussed in this immediate section serve to clarify what is meant by this term. The function of GGPs is then later explored where the article draws upon empirical analysis of five GGPs in a single transnational movement network.

GGPs are global

The claim to being 'global' evident in GGPs typically appears in the list of signatory groups and the petition's statement. For example, published in February 2010 and targeting North American and Australian companies' announcements to expand commercialisation of genetically-modified wheat, the GGP titled '*Definitive Global Rejection of Genetically Engineered Wheat*' repetitively makes the claim that it represents a 'global consumer rejection of genetically engineered wheat'. Although initially formed between North American and Australian groups, the list of signatories is divided into 26 countries with 233 agricultural, environmental and consumer advocacy groups named from 4 continents. The anti-GE wheat GGP was coordinated by the *Canadian Biotechnology Action*

Network, hosting the petition online where groups were invited to give their signatures. Despite being signed by often hundreds of groups, in most cases it is clear that GGPs are authored by one or only a few groups which then take on responsibility for collecting signatures via their own contact lists. Online portals where groups may sign-up then serve to facilitate this process rather than, necessarily, market the petition. Given the initially small set of groups formulating the petition, the claim of being 'global' works rhetorically to extend the authors' own geographically-limited basis. In the above GGP, this extension to the 'global' includes: representation (i.e. the reference to global consumers); network-building (i.e. solidarity between the signatories representing 26 countries in 4 continents); and, the field of contention (i.e. framing the target as 'multinational' companies and the protesters as 'groups from around the world').

Any claim to being globally representative should be treated critically, since Northern groups with greater financial and technological resources are better equipped to dominate transnational movement networks (Smith, 2005; Hertel, 2006). The political process through which GGPs are formed remains paramount, as does the role it plays within the wider series of relations constituting the transnational movement network. Online digital media are argued by several scholars to help alleviate imbalances of power by creating more horizontal relations where the cost of engagement and communication is reduced (Juris, 2005; Kavada, 2010). However, GGPs still rely heavily on personal contacts between groups developed by prior relations where resources maintain a determining effect. Signatory counts – including the number of countries they represent – must then attract similar scrutiny where there is great variance in the role each of those signatories has played within the GGP. A critical approach to the 'global' identity of GGPs potentially undermines the value of the term as developed in this article because it may mask important tensions and inequalities amongst the signatories. However, the value of analytically describing these petitions as 'Global' is that it draws research to how they are framed by their authors as well as the transnational character of the relations they represent, if only limited to the request for a signature. Claims of 'global solidarity' found with GGPs need to be approached critically but this does not diminish their role within the formation of transnational movement networks where the establishment of a collective identity is crucial to coordinating the often otherwise only loosely connected actions of individual advocacy groups.

GGPs unite advocacy groups

GGPs are distinct to online petitions targeted at individuals (Della Porta and Mosca, 2005: 176) – whether distributed by unsolicited email or websites (e.g. 'PetitionOnline.com') – and what, where they express global solidarity crossing national borders, might be termed 'Global Individual Petitions' (GIPs). Sometimes GIPs and GGPs overlap, listing signatures from both individuals and groups. For example, in November 2008 a GGP was published criticising financial reform negotiations within the G20 – titled '*Act Now on the G20 Summit: Message to the Leaders*' – and included amongst its signatory list 900 advocacy groups and the names of 1973 individuals. GGP-GIP hybrids should be disaggregated into their respective representation of groups and individuals because, for the purposes of political and social analysis, the process of linking group or individual identities is distinct even in those cases where advocacy groups are staffed by a single activist. The

above mentioned case of the anti-G20 online petition should be treated as a GGP for two reasons. First, the petition privileges the signatures of groups where individuals are listed as an addition. Second, from the perspective of studying transnational movement networks, it is more significant to focus on how the petition links groups as existing collective actors.

Outside of the general demands of the GGP, the issues represented by signatory groups are frequently diverse. For example, it is rare that they will include only groups that can be categorised under one issue, e.g. 'development'. Rather, signatory groups will represent a range of diverging political demands. A GGP featured prominently within what remains one of the most successful transnational movement networks – that helped halt OECD negotiations towards the proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), in 1998 – as a medium in which to express the movement's collective identity (Egan, 2001; Johnston and Laxer, 2003; Deibert, 2000). Titled 'Joint NGO statement to the OECD', the GGP was signed by 565 advocacy groups located in 68 countries. First, it expressed the network's collective identity as: formed through a 'coalition' of diverse issue-groups (development, environment, human rights, labour, consumer, women's); and, as global ('groups from around the world, with representation in nearly 70 countries'). Second, it framed the anti-MAI critique where it was posted online and sent to politicians and civil servants active in the OECD negotiations. Third, it acted as a point of unification where its initial production required a dialogue able to narrow down the network's critique into a series of clear political demands to which 565 advocacy groups would be willing to give their signature.

The GGP which emerged in campaigning critical of the MAI demonstrates the enigma of this particular blend of transnational political activism and online digital media. First, the claim of the GGP to represent a series of specific group identities representative of worldwide constituencies requires scrutiny. Are all those interests equally active? What does it mean to claim the GGP represents groups from 'nearly 70 countries'? In other words, what political process have advocacy groups undergone to produce what remains a highly ambitious claim of unity? Any form of networking by advocacy groups incurs politics where power is never far away (Hertel, 2006). Wherever documents – such as a web-site – are published in the name of the overall network there must be a political process through which individual group identities are framed within the collective identity. GGPs are especially interesting because they include a signatory list of advocacy groups frequently reaching several hundred and far in excess of the number of member groups suggested by other actions carried out in the name of the network. The anti-MAI GGP is no exception here, leaving a puzzle as to what constitutes membership of a network where the age of online digital media and the complexity of global politics sees membership as often highly fluid.

Developing social ties with other groups both facilitates communication and a form of negotiation which, in times, can be expected to have a feedback effect on the character of those social ties and the groups in question (Tilly, 1985). Even where advocacy networks are rarely homogenous, they do require that actions carried out in their name can be placed within commonly-shared frames by which they acquire meaning and resonance for the wider membership (Gillan, 2008). Advocacy groups do not blindly express their support for all causes, but instead act strategically when building a collective identity to be shared with other groups (Chen and Chen,

2010). The relations between advocacy groups may be weak or strong depending on the frequency and strength of their interaction (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). These interactions utilize a diverse range of media, ranging from physical meetings to closed email lists and telephone conference calls. Therefore, understanding what role GGPs play in helping groups develop social ties with one another is essential to studying their role in politics.

GGPs are a form of online digital media

Published online, GGPs are part of the so-called 'electronic repertoire of contention' (Rolfe, 2005) available to activists. Online digital media technologies have been widely adapted in advocacy groups' efforts to build transnational social ties with one another (Olesen, 2005; Carty and Onyett, 2006; Rolfe, 2005; Juris, 2005; 2008; Juris and Pleyers, 2009; Deibert, 2000) to the extent that activists are often cited as key drivers within the evolution of the internet (Willetts, 2010). Insights developed through research into these new media technologies consequently has relevance to how GGPs should be understood.

For several scholars working on new digital media and social movements, the internet is seen to open new avenues for organising that follow a relatively horizontal structure (Juris, 2008; 2005: 191-92; Kavada, 2010). Drawing on Castells and others, Juris argues that: '[t]he Internet does not simply provide the technological infrastructure for computer-supported social movements; its reticulate network structure reinforces their organizational logic' (2005: 197). GGPs typically list their signatories only alphabetically, or via national origins ordered alphabetically, and so present a horizontal structure of coordination amongst those groups. By presenting all signatories as equal, GGPs appear to foster a culture that escapes the type of hierarchy likely where gross resource disparities exist between individual groups in the network. Any promise that online digital media herald horizontal means of transnational movement networking is tempered by research showing that in many cases the relations that make up these networks remain dominated by an elite sub-set of groups – acting as gatekeepers or 'hubs' within the overall flow of communication in the network (Carpenter, 2007: 114; Lake and Wong, 2009). Access to online digital media varies greatly between countries and regions, privileging some groups over others.

However, online digital media do offer more open avenues of interaction amongst groups where travel costs are reduced and communication is faster. GGPs need to be understood in this same light, as both promising equality whilst containing power relations of which their particular articulation is a product. As the article shows through the case study, GGPs are usually authored amongst a small core which only later invites other groups to add their signature. Like any communication technology, GGPs help restructure social interactions but cannot be said to have a determining effect because technological usage remains historically and socially-situated (Hoff, 2000). In other words, using GGPs allows transnational movement networks new ways to develop their constitutive relations, but it does not determine the shape of those relations since all technologies are themselves subject to politics (Hess, 2007; Braun and Whatmore, 2010).

The respective role of online and traditional (i.e. physical meetings) modes of coordination has been widely debated, with concern that the abstracted nature of online communication offers

insufficient opportunity to build the type of human relations required to sustain long-term movements (Carty and Onyett, 2006: 239; Chen and Chen, 2010: 4; Van Laer, 2010). However, in practice, online digital media – and certainly where they work best – act not as an alternative to traditional means for coordination between advocacy groups but rather as a complement to be integrated within existing practices (Kavada, 2010: 359; Juris, 2008: 12-13; Carty and Onyett, 2006: 245; Della Porta and Mosca, 2005: 177). For example, the process of collecting signatures typical to GGPs involve a mix of both old and new networking technologies, i.e. personal contacts, face-to-face meetings, workshops, telephone calls, and emails.

The added-value of online digital media is described by Juris as the: ‘creation of broad umbrella spaces, where diverse organizations, collectives, and networks converge around common hallmarks while preserving their autonomy and specificity’ (2005: 198). The cost of engagement – understood in terms of ideological re-alignment – is then low, allowing greater opportunity for groups to enter a wider variety of transnational movement networks. The downside is that the commitment of those groups may be weak and unreliable if their interactions remain within cyberspace. To be a signatory to a GGP usually implies only minimal commitment from groups unless it includes more material engagement, i.e. joining protest marches, diverting finances towards the petition’s demands. However, the flipside of low cost engagement means that GGPs can be an effective means of spreading a political message – consisting of both a critical analysis and specific demands – amongst advocacy groups. GGPs may be said to then facilitate low-cost political engagement, with the potential that engagement may deepen over time towards becoming more substantial. This capacity is significant where, in general, publishing campaign materials online can lengthen the life of a political campaign beyond the time-span in which activists themselves are engaged, where web-sites are maintained for future access. Creating a virtual life for the network that exceeds the activists themselves is practical where the complexity of contesting global politics means individual groups, each with their own resource-constraints, may exit the network but the overall activity passes onto other groups (Bennett, 2003: 152). GGPs provide one means through which the network can develop a virtual life exceeding any single moment of collective action.

To emerge and be maintained, all movement networks require the means for regular communication, such as telephone conference calls and email lists (Bandy and Smith, 2005: 234). GGPs can be viewed as one such means for ensuring communication between network members, ensuring a coherent frame for collective action. Commitment to the network may vary greatly amongst the list of signatories. As with other forms of online digital media, that groups can express support without spending substantial resources may hollow out online movement networks if not followed up by real-world interaction. However, it also widens the range of groups that may endorse the network’s campaign – adding legitimacy to political demands and indicating which groups outside the network’s main activity may be later persuaded to engage further.

Whilst GGPs are sometimes mentioned in case study research on specific examples of movement networks (e.g. Carty and Onyett, 2006: 239-243; Egan, 2001: 88-89; Meikle, 2002: 136), there has been no attempt yet to define this unique form of transnational politics. One possible

explanation is that, for both researchers and activists, giving a group's signature to an online petition has comparatively low political significance. The petition does not force the group to change its behaviour. Signing a petition provides the incentive that the group can claim new allies whilst facing few sanctions if their commitment to the network extends no further than that signature. As the remainder of the article shows, however, there is a real need to study GGP's because: 1) the questions they pose have relevance for wider research on the relationship between online digital media and transnational movement networks; and, 2) the political process they facilitate where dominant members of the network engage in a potentially conflictual debate over how to define their joint activity.

Case study of GGP's in the anti-GATS transnational movement network

As the above discussion demonstrates, GGP's are worthy of greater attention from social science than has thus far been published. Researchers hoping to meet this challenge face certain obstacles. First, there is a need for a critical approach to both the claims of being 'global' and group solidarity. In particular, what is the political process these claims attempt to erase? Additionally, how important are these claims to the function GGP's serve within transnational movement networks? To better understand these questions, the article structures its analytical strategy around three core issues introduced in the previous section defining GGP's: 1) global solidarity – how the consensus GGP's claim is produced; 2) network unity – the relative transience or duration of network connections between GGP signatories; and, 3) deployment – how GGP's are used alongside old and new protest media.

GGP's potentially play multiple roles within transnational movement networks – helping to establish weak ties, develop those ties, and communicate advocacy towards campaign targets (i.e. authoritative actors). To be equipped to analyse this process, it is necessary to situate GGP's within the wider series of interactions through which transnational movement networks function. The article focuses on the role of five GGP's stretching between 1999 and 2005 within one particular network organised to contest negotiations on the expansion of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) General Agreement on Trade-in-Services (GATS).

How did GGP's help build a collective frame?

GGP's typically present a critical analysis of an issue (i.e. the GATS) and state a series of political demands. In so doing, GGP's present a collective frame or identity under which the list of signatory groups are supposedly solidaric. As has been shown, this collective frame includes the claim that the GGP's represent 'global' concerns. The first task for researchers, then, is to ask how GGP's articulate a collective frame and what role the claim to being 'global' plays in this process. Textual analysis (Howarth, 2005) serves to highlight how the GGP articulates its political demands, including the collective identity of its signatory list. In addition, GGP's designate a specific target for their demands – such as nation-states, international organisations, or private capital. As is shown in the case study, choosing this target is a highly strategic process which can change during the course of the network's activity. The research also identifies how the GGP links the diverse range of issues on which its signatory groups campaign individually. The claims to being 'global' and

group solidarity are then treated not descriptively but as framing devices central to how the GGPs' authors intend to articulate their joint advocacy to both the target and fellow groups.

What relations did GGPs help create?

GGPs rarely provide any indication of either which group/s have authored the GGP or what relations exist between the signatory groups beyond a general unity behind the petition's statement and demands. Data on relations between groups required in-depth knowledge on the political process through which not only the GGPs were produced but also how the overall network criticising GATS emerged and was maintained. Qualitative interviews with group representatives in both the core and periphery of network activity were carried out via face-to-face discussion, telephone calls, and, in some cases, responses to emailed questions. These interviewees were identified based upon both the list of signatories to the GGP and knowledge gained on the respective role of the groups. Whilst some attention was given to peripheral groups, as stated, the majority of the research targeted twenty-two core players in order to better trace the political process behind the production of each GGP. These interviews were particularly important where the formation of the five GGPs was a closed process amongst only a small set of groups. Although an anti-GATS network can be identified as emerging in 1999, it only became properly established in 2001 and continued through to 2005 when activity came to a relative close. The research period began at the peak of anti-GATS activity, in 2003. Following a transnational movement network through the height of its activity means the research is able to properly situate each of the GGPs that emerged within their respective roles. The anti-GATS network remains an important case for research on GGPs due to the frequency with which this form of political activity was used.

How were GGPs deployed?

GGPs cannot be treated in isolation but must be viewed as part of a wider process of network-building involving prior-existing relations, face-to-face meetings, telephone conference calls, emails, and joint publishing of critical reports. Initial research on the network confirmed findings within the literature discussed above, that online digital media typically operate in conjunction with more traditional means of networking when used for transnational advocacy. Background information on how GGPs are integrated with more traditional forms of networking between advocacy groups was successfully collected via participant observation at events where network members met, specific group arrangements and more general sessions including at the Third European Social Forum hosted in London, October 2004, and a meeting organised between Western and Eastern European groups in Budapest February 2005. These events also helped support the research by facilitating many of the qualitative interviews as well as gaining new contacts with activists. Participant observation followed protest marches, public speaker events, and smaller group meetings. Engaging with the activists facilitated a series of informal conversations which proved highly informative for much of the political process behind the campaign. Data was produced via a mix of audio recordings and note-taking (either during the event or in the immediate aftermath, as appropriate).

Five GGPs in the anti-GATS transnational movement network

This section tells the story of five Global Group Petitions (GGPs) within a particular transnational movement network that began to emerge in 1999 to contest the then about-to-be launched WTO negotiations to expand the General Agreement on Trade-in-Services (GATS). Seen by its critics as both a threat to national sovereignty over politically-sensitive sectors (including broadcasting, education, water, and healthcare) and ignoring the needs of developing countries, activists were successful in mobilising a wide international array of groups.

The five GGPs studied (see Figure 1) each served a distinct role within what is described in the article as the anti-GATS transnational movement network. The network itself was only loosely coordinated, to the extent that for some activists it appeared more as a series of overlapping networks (Interview 20). GGPs were then important within this relatively uninstitutionalised series of relations as a point of convergence, helping to form and maintain a series of strategic collective identities.

Global Group Petition (GGP)	Final Publication Date	Stated Number of Signatory Groups
<i>WTO - Shrink or Sink</i>	December 1999	429
<i>Stop the GATS Attack Now!</i>	March 2001	596
<i>Nairobi Civil Society Declaration on the GATS</i>	May 2003	25
<i>The Evian Challenge – a Civil Society Call for the EU to Withdraw its GATS Water Requests</i>	June 2003	146
<i>Stop the GATS Power Play Against Citizens of the World</i>	June 2005	148

Fig. 1. List of Five GGPs Used in the Anti-GATS Transnational Movement Network

The articulation of these collective identities and their strategic role within the movement network took various forms through the five GGPs, beginning as an initial attempt to build on critical momentum in the aftermath of mass protests against the WTO's Seattle Ministerial Conference in December 1999 (Smith, 2001). Published the day after the WTO event collapsed, the GGP titled '*WTO – Shrink or Sink*' listed an anti-GATS critique within a broader set of demands that with 429 signatories claimed to span both the 80 countries and the spectrum of critiques which

fell somewhere between advocating either the reduction or abolition of the multilateral trade regime.

However, a GATS-specific GGP did not appear until March 2001 – titled ‘*Stop the GATS Attack Now!*’ with signatures from 596 groups representing 63 countries. Many activists saw this GGP as the formal launch of an anti-GATS transnational movement network. In conjunction with the GGP’s publication, a group of North American and Western European groups organised both a workshop that included groups from Africa and Asia, and a press conference.

The strategic focus evident in the GGPs became narrower in 2003 with a meeting initiated by a UK-based group in the Kenyan capital between a mix of Western but also predominantly African groups. The meeting resulted in the GGP titled ‘*Nairobi Civil Society Declaration on the GATS*’, and was addressed to the governments of developing countries with the demand that they defend themselves against the demands of Western governments in the GATS negotiations.

Also in 2003, prior to the WTO’s September Cancun Ministerial Conference where GATS negotiations were expected to feature prominently, activists published a GGP titled ‘*The Evian Challenge – A Civil Society Call for the EU to Withdraw its GATS Water Requests*’. Evidencing the strategic use of a GGP, the ‘Evian Challenge’ played on a then well-known international advertising campaign for a leading producer of bottled water and criticised the European Union as using the GATS negotiations to privatise water utilities in developing countries in the interests of European multinationals. The GGP was time-bound, aimed to target both the EU’s delegates but also those representing countries from whom activists saw the EU as hoping to extract concessions on water utilities (Interview 15). Relating back to the role of GGPs in building advocacy networks, the ‘Evian Challenge’ provided a focal point for the transnational movement network to influence the actions of individual groups when lobbying their national governments.

Later, in June 2004, when the GATS campaign had long since peaked and appeared to be losing interest from many groups, there was an attempt led by some of the original groups most dominant in the network to reignite interest with a statement of commitment to the campaign – titled ‘*Stop the GATS Power Play Against Citizens of the World*’.

Information collected via interviews or participant observation puts light on the political process involved, although it should be re-stated that the research was not able to observe the actual formative process behind these GGPs due to the closed nature in which it occurred. As with all forms of online digital media, GGPs do not operate in isolation but are typically integrated with more traditional forms of interaction between activists. Conversations with activists confirmed the importance of telephone conference calls between a core group of like-minded groups who would author the petition statement prior to its release for group signatures.

GGPs helped build a collective frame of contention

What becomes evident is, for activists, GGPs have multiple functions within the network. First, the process of drafting a GGP forces a core set of advocacy groups to formulate a collective frame of contention. As is the case with the five GGPs analysed here, the collective frame remains

broad and encompasses a long series of otherwise distinct political demands relating to issues such as development, environment, and public services. However, for those involved, constructing a frame around which the groups may be presented as unified is a highly political process, a UK-based activist central to the anti-GATS transnational movement network describing it as:

[A] painful political process..., where you're constantly vying over the messages that you want to get across. Trying to do that within a national context is hard enough. Trying to do it globally actually brings to the forefront some of the political disagreements in a coalition...[because] they do bring an issue down to two pages, once you've got that consensus (Interview 15).

Responsibility for authoring the petition statements appears to have varied in each of the five GGPs, although certain groups appear often dominant (Interviews 11 and 18). That process has taken place at the centre of a nexus stretching between Canada, Western Europe, and Australasia. The exception was the *Nairobi civil society declaration*, although this was initiated by a UK-based group. The process of forming a consensus – a collective frame of contention – for anti-GATS activity was, in general, a slow process. The five GGPs represent points at which this process was effectively accelerated, steering activists towards reaching a clearly stated series of finite political demands. This process relied upon a series of physical meetings (as with 'Stop the GATS Attack Now!') but was largely conducted via telephone conference calls and electronic distribution of draft petitions between a closed set of core groups. Consensus formation was delimited by this advocacy elite of typically Western groups, with changes to the draft GGPs based upon requests for greater inclusion of, for example, 'gender' demands (Interview 23).

The core set of authors is typically limited to just a few groups, any engagement closely associated with their degree of expertise on a highly technical and complicated multilateral trade agreement. The importance of expert knowledge meant that particular individuals became dominant, including a New Zealand academic and education-focused activist whose importance can be traced back to her role in being one of the first published critics on the new GATS negotiations (Interview 22). Expert knowledge featured prominently within campaign literature where certain names frequently appeared within the list of references. The five GATS-related GGPs were an exception, however, by deliberately foregoing any expression of inequality amongst the signatories. Despite power imbalances within their formation, the GGPs analysed here ordered their signatories alphabetically – either by name or their country of origin. Any reader of the GGPs would therefore be left with the impression that each of the signatories was equally committed to the collective political demands listed. All five of the GGPs analysed present their political demands within a project of 'global' solidarity amongst groups from all over the world. For example, whilst the 'Nairobi Civil Society Declaration' warned that GATS presented a specific threat to developing countries, it concluded with the statement: 'We commit ourselves to continue building global solidarity in our common struggle against corporate-driven, northern imposed policy agendas'.

GGPs helped build a movement network

A Canadian activist also central to anti-GATS activity explained that GGPs are often the first step in helping to broaden the campaign beyond the core set of groups, the formation of a collective frame providing a sense of ‘momentum’ (Interview 18). The path GGPs take from a first draft to online publication and being sent to the governance target can be understood as a series of ever-expanding concentric circles each encapsulating a wider group of actors (see Figure 2).

Fig. 2. The Multiple Stages of Producing a GGP

Simplifying a campaign message into a short statement of two pages is seen as important by activists as a way to build a movement where, according to one of the interviewees: ‘you’re actually taking it out, simplifying it, and taking it to a much wider global audience’ (Interview 15). GGPs are seen by advocacy groups as one way to raise awareness of their cause amongst other like-minded organisations (Interview 22). It is clear, however, that activists central to the five anti-GATS GGPs did not see the signatory list as constituting strong ties within a network (Interviews 15 and 22). For example, it was difficult ensuring that groups agreeing to sign a GGP would follow the signature with further action, such as putting pressure on their domestic government’s position in the GATS negotiations (Interview 22). GGPs then featured as one tool amongst many within the wider process of building a movement against the GATS. The strength of network ties, as is mentioned below, varied greatly. On their own, GGPs provide evidence of only superficial ties between groups that may well not last beyond publication of the petition. Analysis of the political process behind the formation of the five anti-GATS GGPs suggests a more mixed story in which a core of groups maintained a stable network of reciprocal relations at the centre of a series of more peripheral and sporadic relations. The unequal nature of relations within the movement was reflected in the series of actions that went beyond the GGPs, where only the core would invest resources within the publication of campaign documents, public meetings, or street protests.

The argument of this article has been that the production of a GGP helps initiate a process of interaction beneficial to forming and maintaining transnational movement networks. However,

whilst the anti-GATS case outlined here demonstrates the value of GGPs in facilitating this process, it also makes clear that activists themselves remain sceptical as to the long-term value of these petitions. All five of the GGPs studied make the claim to being 'global' in their statements and the list of countries represented by the signatory groups. However, groups based in Western countries have been dominant in authoring the petitions and organising the collection of signatures. The centrality of just a few groups despite the list of signatures running often to a hundred or more groups means the number of signatories can be taken as no more than indicating, at best, a series of weak network ties. The unequal 'global' character of the five GGPs mirrored the general Western-, and what became an increasingly European-, dominance of the anti-GATS transnational movement network, which was at least partially seen by activists as a strategic choice due to not only resources but also their perception of the European Union as the central protagonist in promoting the most controversial aspects of the GATS negotiations (Interviews 21, 18 and 15).

Interviews with groups based in developing countries confirmed their minimal role within the five GGPs (Interviews 12 and 13), although a Kenyan activist described the overall anti-GATS network as 'multi-pronged' – in that there were many different forms of activity running in parallel to critique the liberalisation of services (Interview 13). A Geneva workshop between activists, organised by a Canadian group, included a majority of advocacy groups based in developing countries (Interview 18). The Kenyan activist's own national political context meant public protests were dangerous, but influence could be exerted via a mix of attendance at meetings with government officials and participation in European meetings to support, for example, campaign claims that the GATS negotiations threatened to undermine development policies in Africa.

Whether being a signatory to a GGP leads to stronger relations in the future is difficult to ascertain from the five GGPs studied here, for the simple reason that they cannot be separated from a broader social context. Signatory groups have been contacted by those groups responsible for authoring the petition and attracting signatures. Such contacts have typically taken place via telephone calls or physical meetings, such as the workshops from which 'Stop the GATS Attack Now!' and the 'Nairobi Civil Society Declaration' emerged. GGPs have sometimes served as the initial motivation for making contacts with other groups, however, which provide the basis for future transnational movement network activity.

GGPs are deployed alongside both old and new media

GGPs were, for some activists, an instrument of direct advocacy aimed at their campaign targets – who were primarily Member-state governments and their delegates to the GATS negotiations. By providing a focal point for the advocacy of individual groups, GGPs help to mainstream campaign demands. In an interview, one group's representative active in the anti-GATS network stated: 'I think [GGPs]...can be useful to show some governments that this is not just an initiative being taken by a few kind of crazies' (Interview 22). Additionally, where GGPs serve to demonstrate wide support for political demands, the role of these petitions as framing devices becomes evident once more. Activists are strategic when it comes to deciding which groups should be contacted for signatures. In particular, there is an assumption that GGPs can have a greater

impact only if they can include involvement from established groups, including trade unions, and represent a list of signatures coming from a broad geographical spread of countries (Interview 22). GGPs were deployed extensively online, both by the core groups actively attracting signatories, but also by some signatory groups who had relatively little involvement in the production phase but nevertheless placed the petition on their own websites. Activists interviewed were typically reluctant to define the deployment of any of the five GGPs as either a success or failure. One activist, for example, emphasised that it was important not to get too excited about their lobbying potential (Interview 15). The act of signing a GGP required little expenditure of resources by groups, representing only a small commitment to the political demands listed. However, where the activists saw the GGPs as having most impact was as part of the wider process of building momentum towards a growing transnational movement network. The success or failure of the five GGPs was therefore viewed within the context of the broader movement.

The five anti-GATS GGPs sit amongst a much wider repertoire of contention utilized by activists, which includes both online and more traditional offline avenues for communication and advocacy. In addition to workshops and telephone conference calls, a Dutch group was instrumental within the network by hosting a website (GATSWatch.org) which helped provide links to the GGPs and distribute critical analysis communicating the highly technical GATS text to groups themselves lacking sufficient expertise (Interviews 8 and 14). Other online digital media included a series of closed and public email lists disseminating both strategy amongst a select number of groups – including coordinating joint protests outside the European Parliament – and more public information to interested individuals (Interview 11). These email lists were utilized in the initial production of the five GGPs, which were then published – either directly or via hyperlinks – upon the GATSWatch website. The five GGPs were therefore deeply integrated within the wider electronic repertoire of contention utilized by the movement. The use of GGPs alongside both old and new protest media underlines the eclectic character of movement networks, which is exaggerated at the transnational level where groups with diverse resources, political contexts, and advocacy approaches are brought together.

Conclusion

This article has focused on a frequently common but previously under-researched protest media by which transnational movement networks seek to influence global politics. What are defined here as ‘Global Group Petitions’ (GGP), as has been shown, express a claim of global solidarity linking a smaller network of groups with a much wider series of groups located throughout the world. The article has developed a detailed definition of GGPs and their function via the case of five GGPs used in a single transnational movement network. In so doing, the argument has been made that GGPs are important because they can both facilitate and signal a point of unity through which the only loosely connected actions of advocacy groups may be coordinated within a collective identity.

In the case of the anti-GATS transnational movement network, GGPs helped build on the success of earlier protests and bring an anti-GATS critique to the centre of a larger movement. As the campaign progressed, GGPs were used again to strategically re-frame the general anti-GATS

demand to focus on more specific issues (water rights and development). Interviews with the activists involved evidenced a mix of both strong ties (e.g. regular telephone conference calls) and weak ties (e.g. agreeing to be a signatory group) in the production of GGPs. If taken at face-value, the claims of global solidarity made by GGPs risk biasing research to identify networks where there exist only the most shallow forms of interaction – to confuse a media tool for a political community. However, as is made clear here, these petitions can help play a role in forming and maintaining transnational networks of advocacy groups by creating a point of unity. Like any form of online digital media, GGPs provide what Juris was earlier quoted as calling ‘broad umbrella spaces’ for integrating diverse political interests (Juris, 2005:198). In the age of online media where network ties may be highly fluid, to discount GGPs as only weak evidence of a network movement misses an important aspect of global politics. GGPs are loose networks. Their durability depends, however, upon the ability to integrate more physical (and traditional) means of coordination between activists. As loose networks they have at least the initial advantage that groups can join with relative ease and so be exposed to further integration. To ascertain the full extent of the role GGPs play in transnational social movements there is then an urgent need to continue the project started here and further categorise and critically analyse the use of global group petitions in global politics as one of many media used by transnational movement networks.

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