SOCIAL FORUMS AND THE CELEBRATION OF DIVERSITY: Internet technology between radical democracy and factual technocracy

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INTRODUCTION

A strong civil society—and a wide variety of social movements more specifically—are crucial for achieving a healthy and stable democracy (Almond & Verba 1989; Putnam 2000). In their unremitting pursue of, and contribution to a "democratization of democracy" they are constantly striving for the creation of new spaces of deliberation and channels of access to the political system (della Porta & Diani 1999: p.245).

One of the most visible and recurring high points of the global justice movement is the open space it has created for debate and interaction about their common goals and struggles. These so-called Social Forums are both longing for more participatory and deliberative democracy—a democracy 'from below', as well as being a democratic exercise itself (Teivainen 2004; della Porta 2005b). As one activist put it: *"[the World Social Forum is] an active process where we can experiment, learn and get to know how a democracy led by the people feels like"* (cited in Pleyers 2004: 514).

The theory of deliberative democracy expresses a set of normative ideals according to which actual political processes are evaluated and usually found to be adequate (Young 2001: p.672). It implies a normative question about how a democracy *should* work, but on the other hand it also delivers useful empirical tools to assess how a specific model *can* work (Haug 2006). Following della Porta's (2005a: p.74-75) definition we have *"deliberative democracy when, under conditions of equality, inclusiveness, and transparency, a communicative process based on reason (the strength of the argument) transforms individual preferences into consensual decision making oriented to the public good"*. The global justice movement and more specifically the open space it has created, offers a clear understanding of what such a deliberative setting might look like. Its organizational code, which Bennett (2005) has described as something of a meta-ideology, emphasizes several deliberative characteristics like, inclusiveness (versus exclusiveness), horizontal network structure (versus hierarchy), direct participation (versus delegation), consensus (versus voting), and so on (della Porta 2005a: p.79). One of the most distinguishing features of the Social Forum process is its celebration of diversity (Glasius & Timms 2006). Diversity and inclusiveness are key in the process of the Social Forum, as well as in its conception of how genuine and radical democracy *can* work. In the words of Janet Conway (2005: p.427): *"The Social Forum is successfully fostering convergence among movements world-wide through the promotion of*

pluralism. It is this extraordinary paradox—that embracing diversity is producing unprecedented coordinated action on a global scale—that is key to the generative power of the Social Forum and suggestive of a new democratic politics on a world scale."

Yet, the Social Forum process as an experiment in deliberative democratic ideals, is not beyond dispute. As it exist today on a global scale, but also on a regional (e.g. European), national or even local level— the Social Forum has also come under criticism, exactly for the practical limits to its democratic quality (Rioufol 2004). Several "sites of tensions" among activist participating in the different Social Fora as well as among scholars investigating them, often reveal successes but also persisting difficulties of implementing the precious ideals of deliberative democracy within the organizational structure of the Forum (Biagiotti 2004; della Porta 2005a, 2005c; Glasius & Timms 2006). These tensions have been clearly summarized by Glasius & Timms (2006) in their contribution to the Global Civil Society Yearbook 2006,— tensions which have been the object of both activists' as well as scholarly discussions ever since the first Social Forum in Porto Alegre (see e.g. Schönleitner 2003; Farrer 2004; Sen *et al.* 2004; Allahwala & Keil 2005). One often heard critique is, for instance, the lack of clear rules, which may allow some members to gain disproportional influence during preparatory meetings. The unregulated deliberative democracy as practiced has a paradoxical outcome: only the most powerful organisations can make themselves heard, since they have the knowledge, reputation, and means to do so (Biagiotti 2004: p.533). Moreover, according to Biagiotti (2004), as more (and more diverse) groups and individuals will enter the Forum, the creation of more formal and rigid institutional structures will be inevitably. It will force the movement to search for new mechanisms of consultation, consensus-building and even voting (Schönleitner 2003: p.133). According to these authors, Michel's Iron Law of Oligarchy is lurking, threatening to strike the movement in its core; the very organizational mechanisms of bureaucracy and technocracy the movement wanted to defeat, might turn out to be the necessary way to keep the movement together and to guarantee it's productivity. In addition, some critics wonder whether the Social Forum can ever be truly democratic since many people, groups and organizations lack significant resources, both financial and social, which are necessary to simply attend and even more so to take up an active role in actual decision-making processes (Pleyers 2004).

The convergence of plurality, and the celebration of diversity are among the key features of the Social Forum process. Yet, the inclusion of, for example, younger activists or indigenous

movements in the organizing bodies, are but two examples of the difficulties of getting a truly diverse range of movements and individuals involved. Many social forum observers fear the domination of the Forum's process by a selected group of individuals, or organizations with only a sufficient amount of resources, skills and experiences. With regard to the ESF one interviewee points out: *"The ESF is a democratic platform where everybody van speak and indicate its position about big questions in the world against neo-liberalization, globalization, etc.... But there is a program, and there are big organizations in the ESF like from France, Italy, England which shape the actual decision making mechanism. It is a big problem for other organizations who want to indicate their point of views and define their positions because each time they are dominated by the other. It is why people stay away."* (personal interview, 2006). Another respondent concurred with the latter, as she questions the World Social Forum, which is very likely to be organized in a similar way as the ESF: *"There is a very strong and organized bulk of organizations which are quite powerful and which have actually determined priorities and agendas. And even if you go to the forum, and you see one face of the forum, you have to bear in mind that there is another face which is the composition of this International Committee covering together old trade unions and political activist from the sixties and seventies to more old-fashion NGO's and social movements. And this bulk of people which is limited to 20-30 international organizations or movements is very powerful and most of their decisions and directions and guidelines are not very transparent. I think he whole bulk of organizations in the forum mostly are not aware of the existence of this parallel structures. In the case of Brazil most organizations do politics, not at the venue, but the politics are done in other venues which are also physically separated."* (personal interview, 2006, p.65). Sometimes this "hidden domination", becomes very visible (especially during the London European Social Forum) as Glasius & Timms (2006: p.222) indicate: *"one of the most central ideological clashes played out in social forums […] conceptualized as the problem of the 'horizontals' and the 'verticals'."* Although they represent of course two rather stereotypical stances, their argument reflects a lasting division between large traditional organizations like NGOs and major labour unions who mostly perfectly thrive within the prevailing institutionalized structures on the one hand, and more radical groups, loose networks or individuals who's primarily concern is finding others ways of deliberation and action with and against the state on the other. One staff member of a big Belgian NGO elucidates symptomatically: *"...sometimes you are better off with a clear structure and explicit decision-making procedures, but where it is allowed that some organizations have more things to say than others as a result of investments for example. When they take part in*

a decision making body, they too make clear they want to have something to say... I rather prefer that than some sort of totally open democracy with no structure at all and where you realize that after four, five years a parallel structure or invisible hierarchy or decision making process has come to exist with no transparency at all." (personal interview, 2006).

The question then is: who is included and overrepresented, and, maybe more important, who is excluded and should be included. The diversity problem is at stake on at least three levels: (1) socio-demographic diversity , (2) professional diversity, and (3) issue diversity.

The Social Forum, and especially the transnational (European) or global ones, have been criticized of 'champagne activism': *"open only to those who can afford the time and money to fly around the world and discussing global problems"* (Glasius & Timms 2006: p.225). Having sufficient resources or finding proper funding is one of the main issues at transnational forums. And it is even more important in the preparation of the Forum which occurs in different Prepatory Meetings which often move across different countries. In the run up to the fourth ESF in Athens, there were four Prepatory meetings: in Athens, Prague, Istanbul, and Vienna. *"We just could not afford it to send someone to each EPA"* (personal interview, 2006)*,* was one of the most highlighted extenuations of those respondents who were not so much involved in the preparation of the Forum. These respondents indicated they relied heavily on the existing network through the Internet. The fact that the entrance fee of €7 excluded many local people from being able to participate at the recent WSF meeting in Nairobi also shows that the ideal of all-inclusiveness is not easy put into practice, and that individual and professional diversity are far from established. Likely, this also has an effect on issue diversity: when smaller, less resourceful organizations are kept away from participation and decision-making, the issues they deal with are likely to have fewer weight on the Forums' agenda. One of the interviewees of Günther Schönleitner (2003: p.132) puts it like this: *"Either your opinion is legitimized by a network, a campaign or an organization, or [it] doesn't have any weight…What you represent gives force to what you say".*

In the search for a way to overcome these difficulties, scholars investigating democracy and social movements have started to focus on the possible democratic impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) on social movements. The reasons therefore are twofold. First of all, ICTs are promising tools for the enrichment and empowerment of (different groups within) civil society, by enabling the previously disengaged to become

politically involved (Jensen *et al.* 2007). According to some scholars, ICTs will foster civic engagement and herald a new era of deliberative democracy (Davis & Owen 1998; Coleman 1999, 2001; Walch 1999). Secondly, contemporary social movements appear to be keen adopters of these new interactive technologies, exactly because of their preference for horizontal organizational structures and a strong demand for internal democracy (Bennett 2003; van de Donk *et al.* 2004). The most well-known example of these characteristics is the Global Justice Movement, which is often defined as a movement of many movements—a coalition of coalitions (Klein 2001), as a disparate and ever-changing network of activist groups and communities (Day 2004: p.13; Juris 2005), always in *a state of flux*, with actors withdrawing in order to focus on their specific campaigns and interests, while new actors will occupy their place (Kavada 2005: p.81). Its compositional diversity of networks implies an infinite mix of different issues, interests and causes (Katz & Anheier 2006), which is set within both the economic (opposition to neo-liberalism) and political (support for democracy and control of the economy) spheres, and also incorporates cultural and identity dimensions (Pleyers 2004: p.507). All of which it has translated into this ethos of inclusiveness, diversity, and commitment to radical democracy (Bennett & Givens *forthcoming*). ICTs, and especially the Internet, are seen as key tools to enhance the democratic character of the Forum (Whitaker 2004). And, as Kavada (2006) established in her study on the use of e-mail lists in the run up to the ESF in London (2005), they might especially do this by changing the *conditions* under which a deliberative setting is created. According to Kavada (2006) the spread and use of these mailing lists encourage openness, plurality, participation and decentralization of leadership among its users. ICTs may enhance the *transparency* of the process. They can foster participation among previously underrepresented groups and individuals within the process, thus being more *inclusive*. And they might provide more *equal* access and input opportunities among participants with different organizational size, and with different amount of resources and experience.

Based on survey data gathered at a European and a national social forum, this paper explores on the threefold problem of diversity (socio-demographic, professional and issue diversity), assessing what types and kinds of activists, groups or organizations were (more) involved in the preparation and organization of both the European and Belgian Social Forum. We will measure involvement in two different ways: (1) the extent to which one feels committed to the Social Forum (identifies him- or herself with the Forum and its adherents), and (2) the extent to which one is actually involved in the preparation and organization of the Forum (whether

one attended preparatory meetings, or organized a workshop at the Forum, etc.). So, the first measure of involvement is rather a subjective one, whilst the second is a more objective way of assessing one's actual involvement. In a subsequent section we shed light on the possible impact of ICTs on these two ways of involvement controlling for specificities in terms of socio-demographics, professionalization, and issue affiliation. But, first of all, let us introduce the two Social Forum Surveys and our two main dependent variables.

DATA AND MEASURES

The European and Belgian Social Forum Survey

To address the above questions we make use of survey data collected at two different social forum events. One survey was taken among participants at the fourth ESF in Athens, 4-7th of May 2006 and a second among participants of the third BSF in Brussels, 16th of December 2006. Paper versions of both the ESF and the BSF survey were distributed at the Forum venues itself: about 600 in Athens in the first two days, and about 678 in Brussels. The response rate in Athens was rather disappointing (only 68 were received on the last day of the Forum). In the weeks and months after the Forum, ESF participants were further invited to an participate in an online version of the same survey. We used the existing emailing lists (700 subscribers) and received about 1500 unique email addresses of the Greek Organizing Committee of people who had registered themselves online to participate in the event. Also a news entry was placed on the official website of the Athens' ESF. The number of possible reached respondents (3000) therefore is a really rough estimation. In Brussels, on the other hand, already 108 questionnaires were received on the same day. In the weeks immediately after the event another 87 respondents returned their questionnaires by using the postage paid envelope we gave them together with the survey. Yet, although the paper version was rather successful (response rate of 29%), the online version of the BSF survey was not a great success. The Organizing Committee of the BSF did not agree with sending an e-mail to the people who registered online or had given their e-mail address when registering the day itself for obvious reasons of privacy. As a result, only the existing e-mailing lists were used (about 100 subscribers). Only 10 people participated in the online version, which all indicated also having received a paper version of the questionnaire at the Forum. After processing and cleaning the data a total amount of 510 ESF and 205 BSF participants had filled in a complete questionnaire. Table 1 provides some first figures and facts of these two surveys. General

socio-demographic features indicate a highly educated (even hyper-educated), male public. Among the BSF respondents there are, compared to the ESF sample, slightly older, mostly male and relatively less educated participants.

Table 1   Figures and facts of both the European and Belgian Social Forum Survey, May and December 2006

	4th ESF, Athens 4 – 7 May, 2006	3rd BSF, Brussels 16 December, 2006
# participants	10,000	800
Questionnaires		
Distributed	3000[a]	678
Response	510	205
Response rate (%)	17.0	30.3
Socio-demographics		
% male	52.7 (N=509)	55.2 (N=203)
Age (mean)	34.6 (N=506)	44.3 (N=203)
Educational level		
None/primary	0.4	1.0
Lower secondary	2.0	4.9
Higher secondary	8.6	12.7
Higher non-university	8.4	28.3
University/doctoral	77.3	50.2
Total	100.0	100.0
Missing	3.3	2.9
Nationality		
Belgium	11.8	89.3[b]
France	6.7	5.4
Netherlands	1.6	1.0
Spain/Portugal	7.5	
Italy	10.0	1.5
Germany/Switzerland/Austria	7.6	
Scandinavia	5.9	
UK/Ireland	9.4	
Turkey	3.5	
Greece/Cyprus	22.5	0.5
Balkan/Eastern Europe/Russia	9.0	1.0
non EU	4.5	1.5
Total	100.0	100.0

Note: [a] the number of distributed is a summation of a really rough estimation of the total amount of email recipients and the amount of distributed paper questionnaires at the Forum venue itself;
[b] these Belgians can be further subdivided into French (55.7%) speaking and Flemish (44.3%) speaking participants which gives an idea of the representation of the two main political regions in Belgium.

Table 1 further indicates a clear overrepresentation of Belgian participants in the ESF survey: most of them being union members who had forwarded the e-mail invitation to their own contacts. The same happened (not shown in this table) with members of the voluntary interpretation movement Babels, who also forwarded the e-mail through their e-mailing lists.

Because the host city of the ESF was Athens, the large set of Greek respondents is not surprising. Within the BSF survey, participants were of course mainly Belgian, but with notably more French speaking (55.7%) than Dutch speaking (44.3%) participants.

The two main dependent variables

As we already introduced above we understand the extent to which one is involved in the preparation and organization of the Social Forum in two separate but related ways. First, we assess the participants' subjective feeling of involvement, that is the extent to which one identifies himself with the Forum and feels committed to the Forum and the other participants. It is not unlikely that people with high such feelings of identification are more willing to be involved in any kind of way, next to merely attending the Forum, which may enhance the democratic participation of individuals and less resourceful and less professionalized organizations. For instance, Donatella della Porta (2005a) describes the capability of the Social Forums to transform initial identities by developing feelings of belonging to a community, which may enhance the deliberative aspect of preference (trans)formation to take into account the points of view of others. In our two Social Forum Surveys we asked whether one agreed or not with the following positions: *"I have a lot in common with the other people present"; "I identify strongly with the others present at the Forum"; "I enjoy being part of this group"; "I feel committed to the other people present at the Forum".* By simply adding the scale points of the answers on these four questions we constructed a new "measure of commitment", recoded to range from 1 "no identification at all" to 10 "very strong identification".

Next to this measure of subjective involvement, we propose a measure of actual, objective involvement. Respondents were asked whether they were responsible for an activity at the Forum (such as organizing a workshop or a cultural activity) or involved in the preparation process (like e.g. attending a preparatory meeting or keeping up with a specific working group). In addition people were asked whether had been in contact with people from other organizations or countries before the Forum took place in order to meet each other at the Forum. Combining both variables we constructed a new "measure of involvement" with 0 "not involved", 1 "only had contact", 2 "only responsible for an activity", 3 "only involved in the preparation", and 4 "responsible for an activity as well as involved in the preparation of the Forum". We provide full details of these measurements for each Forum in Table 2.

Table 2   Descriptives of the two dependent variables among the ESF and BSF sample

		ESF 2006	BSF 2006
Commitment measure	(mean) (stdv)	6.43 (2.03)	6.45 (1.70)
	Range	1 – 10	1 – 10
	N	*460*	*186*
Involvement measure	(in %)		
Not involved		29.6	53.7
Only had contact		20.4	10.2
Responsible for an activity only		14.5	8.3
Involved in the preparation only		16.1	15.1
Responsible for activity + involved in preparation		19.4	12.7
Total		100.0	100.0
N		*510*	*205*
Pearson's correlation between commitment and involvement (.125***)		.149***	.064

Pearson's correlations: ***sig. at the .001 level (2-tailed)

As a Pearson's correlation coefficient between these two measures shows, there is a significant but not very strong relation, indicating that the two are related but still tap in two distinct dimensions. If a person is more effectively involved in the organizational process of a Forum, he or she will have somewhat greater feelings of commitment, or vice versa. This association is stronger among the ESF participants, which may be due to selection methods (including a lot of ESF e-mail lists, mainly used by people affiliated or working within an organization or group). Both ESF as well as BSF respondents feel equally committed, but among the ESF participants there is a slightly larger variety. Most ESF as well as BSF respondents were not involved in the preparation of the Forum or the organization of an activity (50% ESF and 64% BSF). Yet, among this group there are still several participants who did have some contacts with people from other organizations before the Forum took place (20% ESF and 10% BSF).

In the next few paragraphs we will have a look at how our two independent variables relate to the three diversity types: do involvement and commitment differ between people of different socio-demographic backgrounds, with different organizationally strong positions, and representing different issues?

Socio-demographic diversity

A first step to gauge for differentiation among which kind of activist is involved or committed to the Social Forum process, is looking to a series of traditional socio-demographic variables. Table 3 presents first bivariate findings for gender, age, educational level, and occupational status.

Table 3   Correlations of involvement and commitment, and socio-demographic backgrounds among ESF (N=499) and BSF (N=186) participants

	Involvement		Commitment	
	ESF 2006	BSF 2006	ESF 2006	BSF 2006
Gender (ref = male)	-.030	-.091	-.085	-.141
Age (in years)	.159***	-.024	.063	.205**
Educational level	-.086	.003	.040	-.086
Full-time	.143***	-.023	-.035	-.056
Part-time	.047	.046	.057	.031
Unemployed	-.031	-.065	-.025	-.046
Retired	-.012	.067	.025	.146
Housebound	-.052	-.021	.053	-.008
Student	-.174***	-.021	-.010	-.128

Pearson's correlations: ** sig. at the .01 level, ***sig. at the .001 level (2-tailed)

Table 3 shows very limited associations between different socio-demographic features and the extent to which one is involved in the preparation or feels committed to ESF or the BSF. Yet, there is a rather strong and significant association between age, having a full-time job or being a student on the one hand, and being involved in the organization and preparation of the ESF on the other. Older people with a full-time job are very much likely to be involved in the ESF; younger people and students more likely do not. We should however not concentrate too much on the significant levels. The fact that there are no such associations among the BSF sample may be partly due to the low number of respondents. In the BSF there are no such associations. For the BSF participants there is however a strong association between age and feelings of commitment towards the Forum, which is, in turn, completely absent in the ESF. Overall, in terms of socio-demographics there are only limited possible inequalities of who is or is not involved in ESF or BSF process.

Professional, and issue diversity

To assess whether a particular kind of organization is indeed more likely to be involved, we propose the following measures: a first one gauging a participant's position within the Forum

as being a delegate or merely a partaker. Respondents were asked whether they participated as a delegate or representative for any kind of organization or group, and if so what kind of position they occupied within this organization. This resulted in a measure of professionalization, ranging from 1 "not representing any kind of group or organization" to 4 "representing an organization as a director or board member". Second, people were asked whether they were passively or actively involved in a series of different organizations and associations (including religious and student associations, trade unions, peace movements, woman and human rights organizations, global justice and environmental movements, community and charity organizations, political parties). We used a principal component analysis to find underlying dimensions among the list of organizations we highlighted above. This way we can distinguish certain types or styles of activist's affiliations. The factor analysis resulted in four clusters of organizational affiliations: a first cluster of new social movement issues like global justice, peace, environment, anti-racism and human rights; a second cluster around charity and third world movements and organizations with a religious background; a third cluster of more institutionalized organizations; and a last cluster with principally the student movements. Table 4 provides full details of correlations for both the European and the Belgian Social Forum.

Table 4   Correlations of involvement and commitment, and professional and issue differentiation among ESF (N=499) and BSF (N=186) participants

	Involvement		Commitment	
	ESF 2006	BSF 2006	ESF 2006	BSF 2006
Professionalization				
Not as a delegate	-.411***	-.079	-.035	.091
Delegate (member/activist)	.138**	-.156*	.048	-.049
Delegate (staff)	.169***	.196**	-.094*	-.089
Delegate (director, board)	.231***	.119	.112*	.018
Issue affiliation				
global justice, woman/human rights, peace, anti-racism, and environment organization	.172***	.098	.137**	.184*
Religious, charity, 3rd world organization	-.132**	-.009	-.113*	.090
union, political party, community association	.191***	.055	.058	.120
student association	.009	-.084	.030	-.143

Pearson's correlations: * sig. at the .05 level, ** sig. at the .01 level, *** sig. at the .001 level (2-tailed)

Table 4 renders some interesting results. There is a significantly strong and negative association between people who attended the Forum as an individual (not as a delegate), and the extent to which (s)he is involved in the preparation and organization of the ESF. A similar association exists among partakers in the BSF, but is insignificant. Yet, in contrast a significant strong and negative relation exists between regular members and voluntary activists representing their organization at the BSF and the extent to which they are involved. Both the organization of the ESF and the BSF are clearly a matter of the higher level delegates like staff members, administrators, board members and directors. The interesting thing is that these staff members, who are on the one hand more likely to be involved in the organization, on the other hand feel significantly less committed to the Forum. There is a similar but insignificant association among the BSF sample. Because, beside this divergent association, most other correlations between involvement and commitment among the different professional and issue affiliations go in exactly the same direction.

One conclusion we can draw from table 4 is that involvement does not suppose commitment, and vice versa. The higher the rank in the organization one is representing, the more one is also involved in the set-up and organization of the Social Forum. Yet, this does not mean that those same people feel themselves to be more committed to the movement; in fact, this is quite the contrary for ESF participants of staff level. One explanation could be that their higher involvement confronts them with more, and more different people and organizations, representing diverging issues and conveying different opinions. An other explanation could be that, in line with the notion of 'movement entrepreneurs', these participants behave more as movement professionals, trying to obtain their own organization's goals through their Forum contacts and activities, rather than that they see themselves as being part of a joint struggle and a democratic process. Stated somewhat bluntly, this entails the threatening of the ideal of radical democracy by a state of factual technocracy.

INTERNET TECHNOLOGY BETWEEN RADICAL DEMOCRACY AND FACTUAL TECHNOCRACY

The purpose of this last section is to briefly assess the possible impact of the use of ICTs on our threefold problem of diversity (socio-demographic, professional and issue diversity) both

within the preparation and organization of a European and national Social Forum, as well as among the perceived belonging to a broader community of the Forum.

As we introduced in the opening section, ICTs may especially change the *conditions* under which we have a deliberative democratic setting. In the process of the Social Forum, ICTs may foster openness and transparency; they may offer ways of involvement for people with only limited resources to travel, and, as Kavada (2006) observed in her study on the use of email lists during the London ESF, they may distribute power relationships by decentralizing leadership. With regard to the merging process preceding the Athens' ESF, for instance, most of our respondents had quite mixed feelings about the democratic character of how the merging was done, which they scrutinized for not being transparent, with no clear rules, or rules changing in the middle of the process. The merging process consists of reducing all proposals of seminars and workshops to a more confined amount of related activities. On the one hand respondents indicated positive feelings since they were 'forced' to meet and work with people they did not knew before, and which often resulted in a positive experience and outcome. On the other hand, respondents pointed towards several problems: first, only the people present at the European Preparatory Assemblies (EPAs) could defend or change the options of the merging process with regard to their proposal. Second, only those people who did intensive follow up of the merging process were sure that their proposals survived or were properly merged. *"We had the feeling that our proposal could be dropped from one day to another or something could happen that we couldn't expect and that meant that we had to follow the process 24h a day which is practically impossible... things were evolving without involving the ESF participants"* (personal interview, 2006). Interesting, the people who were most critique about the merging process were also those people who were more closely related to it by being actively involved in the EPAs. People who were less involved pointed to the Internet as a tool to be still properly involved in the merging process: *"If you want to have something to say in the Forum you have to be very attentive to all things that happen, which means be actively involved in all the preparatory meetings, actively participating in discussions, but most of all of what happens online on the website: information about dates, whether proposals of seminars were accepted or not, and how they were merged with proposals of other organizations which you perhaps do not want. You have to intervene every single moment about the things that happen online on the website"* (personal interview, 2006). Another activist concurred (cf. infra) that they *"...just could not afford it to send someone to each EPA. That is one reason we are not so much actively involved in the preparation of the*

Forum, but there is a network via the Internet. So we exchanged propositions about which kind of workshop to organize in Athens with the contacts who also deal with the subject of education within the ESF. So the final decisions were not taken at the meetings, but after discussion online." (personal interview, 2006). Finally, another respondent indicated that the Internet made it possible to decide very lately whether they would go or not. Because of lacking financial resources they kept putting of the final decision to send someone of their organization: *"if we haven't had e-mail contact and if we haven't had this contact through the ESF website, we definitely wouldn't have gone"* (personal interview, 2006). A sheer example of how the Internet may reduce virtual costs of participation.

To gauge for the impact of ICTs we propose several measures which count for a detailed description of one's ICT behaviour. These are: (1) whether one has access to the Internet at home; (2) how frequent one uses the Internet or email (ranging from 0 "never" to 6 "a few times a day"); (3) whether one received information on the upcoming Social Forum mainly trough new media channels (website, personal mail or email list) or via other ways; (4) whether one explicitly made use of the Internet to send email to other people about the upcoming Social Forum; and (5) whether one found the online internet facilities of the Forum (like the website, the mailing lists or the workspace) useful or not (ranging from 0 "not useful" to 10 "very much useful"). One problem however must be addressed: we gathered data of the Athens' ESF via the Internet. Hence, we do not have information about activist who do not have access to the Internet. As we tried to overcome this problem by principally distributing paper versions of the questionnaire at the BSF, this turned out to be a fool's errand: only 5.1% answered they did not have access to the Internet. The proportion of non-users was too small to do any statistically valid analysis. By introducing several measures of Internet behaviour we still have, however, an idea of the extent to which one actually used the online facilities in light of the European and Belgian Social Forum.

Table 5 provides the results of a linear regression model for each of our two main dependent variables (involvement and commitment to the European and Belgian Social Forum of 2006), and is further subdivided into a model with (model 1) and without (model 2) the explanatory measures of ICT use. The variables were put in the model using the Enter method. Some of them (educational level, occupational status, being a voluntary activist, frequency of Internet use) were however deleted from the final model because of severe collinearity problems.

Table 5   Linear Regression Model explaining involvement and commitment towards the European and Belgian Social Forum 2006

	Involvement		Commitment	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Social Forum (ref = ESF)	-.162***	-.136***	-.007	.009
Socio-demographic diversity				
Gender (ref = male)	.016	.041	-.066	-.055
Age (in years)	.034	.054	.055	.029
Full-time	-.018	-.034	-.041	-.011
Professional diversity				
Not as a delegate	-.195***	-.155***	.021	.062
Delegate (staff)	.107*	.089*	-.093*	-.109*
Delegate (director, board)	.116**	.062	.030	.017
Issue Diversity				
Global justice, woman/human rights, peace, anti-racism, environmental organization	.105**	.039	.129**	.080
Religious, charity, 3rd World organization	-.103**	-.063	-.087*	-.068
Union, political party, community association	.087*	.075	.036	.017
Student association	-.029	.003	.023	.044
ICT measures				
Information about the Forum via				
flyers, ads, family or friends	--	.043	--	.002
traditional media channels (papers, TV)	--	-.046	--	-.072
new media (website, email list)	--	.131***	--	-.035
co-members/organizational magazines	--	.093*	--	.119**
colleagues and fellow students	--	-.001	--	-.001
Mail forwarded about the Forum	--	.139***	--	.130**
Perceived usefulness of online Forum facilities	--	.213***	--	.122**
Access online at home	--	.076*	--	.018
Adjusted R²	.154	.261	.034	.064
N	630	582	579	541

Note: figures are beta's *sig. at the .05 levels; **sig. at the .01 level; ***sig. at the .001 level.

Among the ESF sample there is a significant higher percentage of activists and campaigners who are involved in the Forum's process, most likely due to sampling methods. Nevertheless, when controlling for the European and Belgian Social Forum, figures of both model 1 explaining involvement as well as model 1 explaining commitment, confirm and reinforce our conclusions from the previous section. The total variance explained in the commitment model commitment is very low (adjusted R² of .034), indicating that other reasons must be found to understand possible differentiation. The adjusted R² of the involvement model is much better (.154). It makes no difference whether you are male or female, young or older, or having a full-time job or not, but if you are attending the Forum merely as an individual and not as a delegate you are most likely not involved in the organization and preparation of the Forum. In terms of issue diversity, people who are affiliated with religious organizations, and more

traditional new social movements like charity organizations and third world movements, are also significantly underrepresented. These people also most likely feel less committed to the Forum. Again, members of the staff also show lower feelings of commitment, despite their significant presence in the organizational and decision-making processes of the Social Forums. Do ICTs change something about these relations?

Introducing several measures of ICT behaviour, model 2 renders somewhat mixed results. If one has access at home, is informed about the Social Forum or has informed other people about the Forum via the Internet, (s)he will be significantly more involved in the preparation and organization of the Forum. Also people who are very positive about the online Social Forum facilities such as the website, or the email lists are more likely to be involved. On the other hand, if one has been informed via member magazines or co-members of an organization, the likelihood of being involved also increases significantly. And this is even more so concerning the extent to which one feels committed to the Social Forum, which is in line with Granovetter's (1973) argument of his distinction between "strong" and "weak" ties. Weak ties are key in connecting members of different social groups ("cliques") in a larger social setting. Strong ties on the other hand bind members *within* a certain group, community or organization and involves larger times and amounts of commitment. Inversely, a rather open information channel like the Internet, which has proved to be great in fostering weak ties (Kavanaugh *et al.* 2005), turns out to be less appropriate to create strong feelings of commitment. Nevertheless, if one has informed other via mail or if one is very positive about the usefulness of the online Forum facilities, the likelihood of feeling very committed to the Forum and the other participants does increase significantly. One explanation may be that people first of all send email to their closest relatives. And, that people who are very positive about the Internet facilities are probably in general more positive about everything. In sum, feelings of commitment merely become established within the womb of strong relationships. The use of ICTs, as a "weak tie instrument", seems to have no substantial contribution towards the production of some kind of collective identity. Moreover, the negative relation between commitment and staff members of a particular organization seems to be reinforced: frankly stated, for them the Internet is just a practical tool, rather than an effluence of an "organizational ideology" (Bennett 2005).

If we look to the three different categories of diversity, inequalities regarding professionalization remain significant. In terms of issue affiliations, however, inequalities

seem to disappear. People who are affiliated with issues that initially were underrepresented (third world issues, charity and religious organizations) seem to benefit well from these tools, compared to the other clusters of issue affiliations. Finally, in terms of socio-demographic backgrounds, there are still no significant inequalities to be found.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering diversity as an essential value of the Social Forum and one of the key features of a deliberative democracy, this paper interpreted, measured, and assessed diversity in a threefold manner: socio-demographical, professionalization and issue diversity. Multivariate analyses showed no significant inequalities regarding different socio-demographic backgrounds. Concerning both other diversity measures, the extent to which a Forum participant is involved, is definitely related to the degree of professionalization and kind of issue one is affiliated with: the higher the rank in the organization one is representing, the more one is also involved in the set-up and organization of the Social Forum. Yet, this does not mean that those same people feel themselves to be more committed to the movement; in fact, this is even quite the contrary for participants of staff level. Involvement does not suppose commitment, and vice versa. Finally, the data show that the degree of participation in the set-up and organization of the Social Forum is also related to the issue one is represented: organizations dealing with certain issues have more to say than those representing others, which could also entail that some constituencies are less represented in the Forum's decision-making process than other. Especially some of the more expected "Social forum issues" (like global justice, peace, civil rights, but also labour and work), seem to outweigh less evident issues like student related issues, or issues linked with charity and religious organizations.

Assessing the role and importance of ICTs, our analyses render some mixed results. In terms of involvement, the extent to which one uses the Internet in light of the Forum explains a great deal of one's degree of involvement. The more a person makes use of ICTs the more likely (s)he is involved in the organization or preparation of the Forum. People who are affiliated with issues that initially were underrepresented (third world issues, charity and religious organizations) seem to benefit well from these tools. On the other hand, ICTs as a "weak ties instrument" are less appropriate in facilitating feelings of commitment towards the European and Belgian Social Forum process. In the hands of staff level activists ICTs seem to

become merely a practical tool, nothing more. Despite these remarks, our results indicate a possible and positive impact of the use of ICTs and its valuable contribution towards a more democratic functioning of the process of the Social Forum.

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