

# GLOBAL JUSTICE AND THE POLITICS OF INFORMATION

*The struggle over knowledge*

RETHINKING  
*Globalizations*

 Sky Croeser



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# **Global Justice and the Politics of Information**

The struggle over knowledge

**Sky Croeser**

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# Global Justice and the Politics of Information

The global social justice movement attempts to build a more equitable, democratic, and environmentally sustainable world. However, this book argues that the actors involved need to recognise the importance of knowledge – including scientific and technological systems – to a greater extent than they presently do.

The rise of the Occupy movement, the Arab Spring, and the Wikileaks controversy has demonstrated that the Internet can play an important role in helping people to organise against unjust systems. While governments may be able to control individual activists, they can no longer control the flow of information. However, the existence of new information and communications technologies does not in itself guarantee that peoples' movements will win out against authoritarian governments or the power of the economic elite. Drawing on extensive interviews and fieldwork, this book illustrates the importance of contributions from local movements around the world in the struggle for global justice. Including detailed case studies on opposition to genetically modified crops in the south of India and the digital liberties movement, this book is vital reading for anyone trying to understand the changing relationships between science, technology, and progressive movements around the world.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars of international politics, social movements, global justice, and Internet politics.

**Sky Croeser** is an adjunct research fellow in the Department of Internet Studies at Curtin University, Australia.

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**This book is an offering of a sort to the places that I love, and to the other places I have yet to visit and fall in love with. It is especially for Perth, where it started, and Εξάρχεια, where I finished it.**



# Acronyms

CCTV	Closed circuit television
DMCA	Digital Millennium Copyright Act
DRM	Digital rights/restrictions management
EFF	Electronic Frontier Foundation
FFII	Foundation for a Free Information Infrastructure
FOSS	Free and open source software
FSF	Free Software Foundation
GEAC	Genetic Engineering Approval Committee
GM	Genetically modified / genetic modification
GMO	Genetically modified organism
GNU	GNU's Not Unix
GPL	General Public License
GREEN Foundation	Genetic Research, Ecology, Energy, and Nutrition Foundation
ICT	Information and communication technology
ISP	Internet service provider
KRRS	<i>Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha</i> (Karnataka State Farmers' Association)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PGA	Peoples' Global Action
PIPA	Protect Intellectual Property Act
SOPA	Stop Online Piracy Act
TRIPS	Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization
WSF	World Social Forum
WTO	World Trade Organization

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# Introduction

Over the last few years, uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and the rise of the Occupy movement in the US and other parts of the world have contributed to a pervasive sense that change is necessary. These protests are, arguably, the latest in a wave of movements that are attempting to contest the structures and effects of neoliberal globalisation. In 1999, thousands of activists turned out to protest against the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference in Seattle in a series of events that the left heralded as the ‘coming out party’ for a global movement (Burbach 2001, 99). These protests represented only a tiny proportion of the global justice movement, built on many years of organising throughout the world (and particularly in the Global South). Until the 1999 protests in Seattle, there was a sense among sections of both the right- and the left-wing in the Global North that neoliberal capitalism had defeated all comers. With the collapse of state socialism as a viable alternative for much of the world, and the end of the Cold War, neoliberal globalisation seemed to have no serious competitors, and ‘[a]s far as the powerful were concerned, there was no opposition to capitalism, no alternative to the “free” market’ (Notes from Nowhere 2003e, 500). On the left, many argued that the identity politics of the 1970s and following decades had fractured opposition to capitalism to the point where it became useless. The global justice movement which emerged in the 1990s and grew in the following decades changed this, leading to a flurry of excitement about a new web of global activism, bringing struggles from around the world together into an overlapping and interconnected movement of movements. Other developments, including the Arab Spring and the growth of the Occupy movement, strengthened the sense that a global resistance to neoliberal capitalism was re-emerging, with a commitment to building alternatives.

The obstacles faced by those attempting to challenge neoliberalism are significant, although the recent global financial crisis has gone some way towards weakening the idea that neoliberal globalisation is the pinnacle of economic, social, and political organisation. Some political elites around the world are even forced to accept, as previous Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd did, that ‘the great neo-liberal experiment of the past 30 years has failed’ (2009). However, the power structures and institutions built up over

## 2 Introduction

previous decades are unlikely to disappear overnight, and it is doubtful that the more sceptical language towards neoliberalism employed by centrists such as Rudd and Obama will translate into deep structural change. Rather, governments around the world are shifting towards austerity politics, further widening divisions between the rich and poor and encouraging environmental destruction. Insofar as any positive alternative to neoliberalism is likely to come about, therefore, it will be in large part a result of pressure by social movements and other actors outside the political and economic establishment. Progressive movements will, therefore, remain one of the primary actors in the search to build alternatives to neoliberal globalisation.

### **Knowledge as a site of struggle**

Knowledge – including that embodied in science and technology – is a vital site of struggle in the battle between actors working to strengthen neoliberal capitalism and those within progressive movements. Both neoliberal capitalism and the resistance to it rely on digital technologies, including the Internet and other communications technologies, although in different ways. In shaping scientific and technological developments, and the way in which these developments are understood and approached, actors alter political, economic, and social systems, just as these systems alter the course of scientific and technological change. The view that science and technology are shaped by forces other than their own internal logic is not a new one, and it underpins the understanding of knowledge as a vital battleground in the struggle to shape globalisation.

This book is particularly concerned with the contest between neoliberal capitalism and progressive movements, which can also be seen as a struggle between two forms of globalisation: globalisation from above, and globalisation from below. Falk defines globalisation from above as ‘reflecting the collaboration between leading states and the main agents of capital formation’. In opposition to this, globalisation from below ‘consists of an array of transnational social forces animated by environmental concerns, human rights, hostility to patriarchy, and a vision of human community based on the unity of diverse cultures seeking an end to poverty, oppression, humiliation, and collective violence’ (Falk 2003, 39). Struggles over knowledge are part of elites’ efforts to further globalisation from above, and activists’ efforts to bring about globalisation from below.

Struggles over knowledge take multiple forms, ranging from attempts to reconfigure particular technologies through to attempts to change how we understand and control the production of knowledge itself. These forms are interrelated. To take what may seem like a trivial example, the debate over whether computer owners should be able to copy copyrighted material on CDs and DVDs is linked to much broader debates over whether information can be owned in the same way as physical property, and the extent to which amateur cultural production should be considered legitimate and valuable.

Similarly, attempts to implement technologies that would allow companies to prevent replanting of patented seeds bring up questions about the role of communities in the Global South in developing agricultural biodiversity and the institutional possibilities for recognising this role. Struggles over knowledge therefore involve complex relationships between contests over particular technologies and much deeper questions regarding control over the production and dissemination of knowledge.

This work examines existing attempts by movements throughout the world to gain (or regain) democratic control over knowledge. Although such concerns may seem like the province of those who are relatively privileged, movements in the Global South have been among the first to engage in resistance by calling for an end to the theft of their biodiversity and for indigenous knowledge systems to be accorded legitimacy. There are also other strands of activism, including the digital liberties movement, which have begun to address threats to the ability of those working towards globalisation from below to organise and communicate. These threats come primarily from governments and corporations, and are spurred on by different motivations, including national security in the case of states (such as the massively expanded surveillance justified with reference to the United States' increasingly-broad 'War on Terror'), and, in the case of corporations, the motivation is to prevent piracy of copyrighted material and to expand profits from digital technologies. Currently, the efforts of activists engaged in struggles over knowledge often remain disconnected and under-recognised. In this book, I argue that if activists are to have any chance of achieving their goals, more attention needs to be paid to these struggles and the ways in which they connect.

### **Movements: the connection between Global North and Global South**

Research in this area frequently focuses only on the North, or only on the South. This is problematic insofar as it obscures the connections between struggles across the world. In order to highlight the connection between struggles in the Global North and Global South the research in this book focuses on two movements: the opposition to genetically modified (GM) crops in the south of India and the emergence of the digital liberties movement, which is working to gain or retain citizen control of key digital technologies, and is predominantly, but far from exclusively, based in the Global North. While these movements may at first seem far removed from each other, there are striking similarities between them. Both movements argue for the value of grassroots and amateur knowledge, diversity, the commons, and democratic control over the technologies that sustain everyday life. By drawing together lessons from each of these movements, *Global Justice and the Politics of Information* demonstrates the importance of contributions from local movements around the world to the struggle for global justice.

My research on the movement against GM crops in Karnataka, India, makes occasional reference to anti-GM activism in other parts of India, situating

the local movement within the broader national and international context. This movement has connections to other activists and groups opposing GM crops within India and in other countries, including *Navdanya*, a group founded by Vandana Shiva. However, the movement in Karnataka is relatively self-contained, and has unique characteristics not shared by other anti-GM movements. Most prominent of these is the domination of the movement by the *Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha* (Karnataka State Farmers' Association, KRRS) during the 1990s and early 2000s, and the resulting discourse that places opposition to GM crops within a Gandhian framework, centring the producer rather than the consumer or environmental issues. In light of the focus in this research on the struggle over globalisation, Karnataka's juxtaposition of the anti-GM movement against the booming information and communication technology (ICT), biotechnology, and business process outsourcing industries based primarily in Bangalore is a microcosm of the larger struggle between different visions of globalisation.

This movement is also particularly useful for my analysis because it highlights the complex way in which the global justice movement is linked to struggles throughout the world. As I will argue in Chapter 4, the Indian opposition to GM crops has an iconic role within the global justice movement. However, closer examination of the relationship between the Indian movement and the global justice movement destabilises any notion that the former is simply contained within the umbrella of the global justice movement. This case study demonstrates that even movements considered to form the core of the global justice movement may have a fragile and tenuous relationship with the broader movement, as the Indian movement does. Examination of this relationship allows a better understanding of the ways in which global justice activism around the world is built from and through a diverse range of overlapping struggles, rather than as a single movement with a clearly defined core and peripheral membership.

At first, my research on the Indian opposition to GM crops focused predominantly on those who were directly involved in protests, lobbying, research, or other activities aimed at preventing the entry into and spread of GM crops in India. The KRRS has received widespread coverage within India, and some coverage overseas, for its anti-GM protests, particularly the destruction of test fields of *Bt* cotton in the late 1990s. Other organisations, including Greenpeace India and the Environmental Support Group, have been involved in researching and publicising GM issues, as well as lobbying state and federal governments. Professionals, particularly academics, journalists, and lawyers, have played a significant role in the opposition to GM crops, both through their work and through outside activism. A wide range of individuals and organisations play a role in the movement's attempts to convince institutions, farmers, and consumers of the need to ban, avoid, or otherwise resist the use of GM crops.

Over time it became clear that this work, and these actors, constituted only a small part of the anti-GM movement's activities and participants. MD

Nanjundaswamy, the late leader of the KRRS, has written that ‘there is no sense in dividing resistance and alternatives, since none of them can take place without the other’ (1998b, 157). Although the most visible section of the KRRS and other groups’ activities are well-publicised direct actions, the vast majority of the work carried out by movement participants is not a direct *opposition* to GM crops, but rather the *promotion* of sustainable, organic, low-input farming, and the use of indigenous seed varieties. Groups such as the Institute for Cultural Research and Action, the Genetic Research, Ecology, Energy, and Nutrition (GREEN) Foundation, and small-scale farmers’ groups selling organic produce relate their promotion of organic farming to the resistance to GM crops, and are understood by others within the anti-GM movement to be a part of this struggle. The movement opposing GM crops is, therefore, also in large part a movement promoting organic, sustainable farming. In doing so, movement participants are contesting claims that the technologies of the Green Revolution and biotechnology are the only way to feed India, and the world’s, growing population, questioning the scientific basis of these claims and calling for indigenous and appropriate technologies and knowledge systems to be recognised as legitimate.

Like the Indian movement, the digital liberties movement involves a complex web of actors, and links together issues that at first glance do not seem directly related. Movement participants make connections between the use of proprietary software, government controls on and surveillance of the Internet, copyright law, and technologies which restrict access to content, linking them through a frame that opposes restrictions on the free flow of information. As is the case with the Indian movement, participants match their opposition (in this case, to these restrictions) with an inventive exploration of alternatives, including Creative Commons licenses, free and open source software (FOSS), and decentralised network structures. Movement participants are often informed by the ideals of democratic liberalism, libertarianism, and (at times) anarchism, and the freedom to exchange and build upon existing knowledge and cultural content is seen as an important aspect of a free society.

However, unlike in the case of the Indian movement, the digital liberties movement is not strongly rooted in a particular geographic place. While the movement in Karnataka draws on experiences and ideas from other areas, it is strongly informed by the historic, cultural, and political context of southern India. On the other hand, although the digital liberties movement is informed and shaped by specific places (most notably the United States, and San Francisco in particular), it is rooted in online spaces and built on and through online cultures and communities. Virtual space is not the same as geographical space, but it shares many of the same characteristics – including its increasing interlinkage with other places and spaces. For this reason I have not drawn the bounds around a particular geographical section of the digital liberties movement, but rather have focused on its online presence.

My interest in the digital liberties movement is twofold. First, because it is a relatively new addition to progressive activism its role is often under-recognised.

Until recently, there was very little understanding among activists globally of the importance of the issues addressed by the digital liberties movement. However, the Internet blackout against the US's *Stop Online Piracy Act* (SOPA) in early 2012 helped to change this, as has growing knowledge of the extent of US National Security Agency surveillance of online communications. This demonstrates, once again, the importance of diverse and decentralised struggles to furthering activists' attempts to reshape globalisation. Second, the digital liberties movement is one of the most important social movements to have emerged over recent decades because the issues that it is addressing are central to the structure and work of activists around the world. It is therefore vital that the digital liberties movement receives attention within activist communities and social movement scholarship.

### Theories and concepts

This work draws on and extends the significant literature that attempts to theorise social movements, which includes the literature that focuses specifically on new social movements and transnational social movements. Both the European, or new social movements, approach, and the North American perspective, which is sometimes split into political process and resource mobilisation theories, have been used here. In doing so, I have been mindful of several critiques of this body of work. The most important of these critiques notes the inward-looking nature of a significant proportion of the social movement literature. Flacks argues that there is a large and ever-expanding body of work that scholars of social movements feel the need to relate to, work within, or synthesise, but that this work is currently more concerned with 'establishing, critiquing, or refining "paradigms"' than with creating theory that is relevant outside the body of literature itself (2005, 7–8). Flacks (2005) recognises the value of social movement scholarship, but also argues that there are important reasons to remain sceptical of the amount of time and energy that scholars of social movements are devoting to the critique of new social movement and North American theoretical perspectives. The most notable of these is the decreasing relevance of this body of work to non-academic audiences. This critique has also been voiced by others, including Cox and Nilson (2007), particularly as it relates to the relevance of social movement literature to activists.

A second important critique of the social movement literature is on its focus on activism in the Global North, which has been voiced by a number of scholars including Foweraker (1995) and Cox and Nilson (2007). Increasingly, the focus on Europe and America is shifting in social movement scholarship, with more work looking at movements in the Global South. This is particularly the case with the literature on transnational social movements, and edited collections on both social movements generally and transnational social movements in particular increasingly include a more diverse range of case studies (see, for example, Richter, Berking and Müller-Schmid 2006; Meyer,



Whittier and Robnett 2002), moving beyond the literature's previous focus on the North. There remains a tendency, however, to treat Southern movements as exotic or in some ways fundamentally different from Northern movements, which continue to define much of the work in social movement studies.

In order to avoid either taking for granted the assumptions of literature based on empirical studies of Northern movements, or allowing the reification of existing social movement scholarship paradigms to dominate my analysis, I have been guided in this work by the concerns voiced by activists. This does not mean a rejection of valuable work done by previous scholars of social movements and transnational social movements. On the contrary, concepts developed over previous decades of work form the backbone of the study. The first and most important contribution which I draw upon is the social movement literature's establishment of 'social movements' as distinct phenomena. The novelty and importance of this contribution, as well as the complexity of social movements as a conceptual entity, is sometimes overlooked now that the term has gained widespread acceptance.

Defining and mapping social movements continues to be a complicated task. Charles Tilly defines a social movement as 'a sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities' that uses a particular repertoire of tactics on behalf of a group of people that claim to be worthy, united, numerous, and committed (2004, 3–4). To this, other scholars in the field have added the presence of network structures (della Porta and Diani 1999, 159) and collective identity (della Porta and Diani 1999, 24) as defining features of social movements. *Transnational* social movements are those that are 'linked across country boundaries ... [and] have the capacity to generate coordinated and sustained social mobilisation in more than one country to publicly influence social change' (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002, 8), as is the case with the global justice movement. Social movements are not static: they are fluid networks of individuals and organisations who come together for movement activities and may participate only rarely. While this gives adequate grounds for deciding what is a movement and what is not (for example, a single non-governmental organisation, or NGO, is not a social movement, while a collection of NGOs and individuals may be), it leaves many issues unresolved.

The most pressing of these is the question of where to draw the boundaries around any particular movement. Is an individual a movement participant if they come to a single protest? Are feminist peace activists part of the feminist movement or the anti-war movement? Are anarchafeminists and liberal feminists part of the same movement? Which movements are 'part of' the global justice movement? Social movements are not just fluid, they are decidedly messy. They frequently overlap, and have blurry borders. When it comes to defining the movements examined here, I have taken the defining characteristics described above as a starting point. I consider actors to be part of the same movement if they have a shared frame of analysis and a common discourse, and if they are connected through formal or informal networks and activities. At the same time, I have attempted to retain a sense of movements as