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## **Connecting the Peripheries: Networks, Place and Scale in the World Social Forum Process**

Hilde C. Stephansen

*The Open University UK\**

\*E-mail: [h.c.stephansen@gmail.com](mailto:h.c.stephansen@gmail.com)

Communication technologies occupy a central place in contemporary theorizations of transnational social movement networks. Not only does the Internet provide the technical infrastructure through which activists communicate and share information, increasing their capacity to introduce oppositional messages into the public realm (Castells); its network architecture is also closely linked to the organizational logic of contemporary social justice movements (Juris). While recognizing the fundamental importance of communication technologies for such movements, this article cautions against overly disembodied conceptions of transnational activist networks and highlights the need to pay attention to issues of place and scale, as well as the importance of affect in the construction of alternative global imaginaries. Through a case study of a small social forum event held in February 2010 in a poor urban community in the south of Brazil as part of the World Social Forum process, the article examines activists' use of communication technologies to construct transnational networks between different place-based actors. It shows that these practices are not simply concerned with establishing links between already existing places; the creation of networks is also inextricably bound up with particular constructions of place. By engaging in a politics that is simultaneously place-based and global in scope, these actors challenge traditional conceptions of scale as well as dominant epistemological paradigms.

**Keywords:** World Social Forum; social movement networks; new communication technologies; place; globality

## **Introduction: The World Social Forum**

The World Social Forum (WSF) is widely recognized as one of the most important manifestations of what might be referred to as the “global Left” (Santos 2006). First organized in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the WSF was originally conceived as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum, which annually gathers the world’s political and economic elites in Davos, Switzerland. The WSF is currently held biennially in different locations around the world (thus far, always in the global South) and regularly brings together tens of thousands of activists from a wide range of social movements, NGOs, and activist groups, united in common opposition to neoliberal globalization and all forms of discrimination by the slogan “another world is possible”. Intended by its founders as an “open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society” (World Social Forum 2001, article 1), the WSF has been conceived since its inception as a site for knowledge production. Founded at a historical conjuncture in which the Left was arguably in a state of crisis and fragmentation, but which also had seen the emergence of a multiplicity of movements against neoliberal globalization, it was conceived as a space in which these diverse currents could come together, engage in dialogue, and begin to elaborate new analyses and alternatives.

One of the most novel – and controversial – features of the WSF has been its supposed status as an “open space”. Described by one of its founders as “only a place, basically a horizontal space” (Whitaker 2008, 113), the WSF does not seek to establish consensus around a common set of positions or speak in the name of all participants. It is in principle open to all civil society actors who subscribe to the fairly minimal requirement of

opposition to neoliberal globalization and who are not engaged in armed struggle, and based on the principle of self-organization: those who organize social forums are meant simply to provide a space for participants to organize their own activities (Sen 2010, 997). In this way, the WSF is meant to function as an “incubator” for new initiatives but without itself becoming a political actor (Whitaker 2008, 113).

Central to the notion of “open space” is the rejection of all *pensamientos únicos* (univocal modes of thought) and explicit embrace of plurality. According to Santos (2006, 13-29), the WSF is expressive of an “epistemology of the South”: an affirmation of epistemic plurality which seeks to replace the “monocultures” of neoliberal globalization (and the modern epistemological frameworks that underpin it) with “ecologies” that allow for a multiplicity of knowledges and practices to co-exist. On such a reading, the WSF expresses a different logic from the universalizing discourses and grand narratives of the “old Left”, and can be seen as a concrete manifestation of an epistemology founded on plurality and irreducible difference.

The “open space” of the WSF undoubtedly has facilitated the convergence of an unprecedented diversity of actors, “creating conditions of possibility for communicative relations across previously unbridged, indeed largely unrecognised differences” (Conway 2011, 219). However, it also has been criticized on a number of grounds. Within the so-called “space versus movement” debate, critics of the open space model have emphasized its inability to foster unified political action and argued for the WSF to become more of a political actor in its own right.<sup>1</sup> Another strand of criticism, meanwhile, has focused on the WSF’s failure to live up to its own ideal of openness. Key issues raised in this respect include: structural barriers to participation such as travel costs and visa restrictions (Ylä-Anttila 2005; Vinthagen 2009; Doerr 2007; Andretta and Doerr 2007); the relatively privileged background of the majority of forum participants (Santos 2006; Smith et al. 2008;

IBASE 2006); the domination of the WSF by cosmopolitan intellectual elites (Pleyers 2008; Worth and Buckley 2009); as well as exclusions arising from cultural norms that favour conventional modes of political expression (Ylä-Anttila 2005; Doerr 2007; Wright 2005) and the persistence of “global hierarchies of knowledge and power that privilege the modern West” (Conway 2011, 217). Though a self-proclaimed “world process” (World Social Forum 2001, article 3), the WSF is clearly far from global in reach, whether in absolute or qualitative terms.

Cognizant of such exclusions and asymmetries, forum organizers have sought in various ways to “globalize” the WSF in order to bring it closer to grassroots movements around the world. This impulse was behind the decision of the WSF International Council to move the forum from its birthplace in Porto Alegre after 2003, and is also discernible in the multiplicity of social forums that the WSF has spawned at different scales; from continental gatherings in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas to neighbourhood-level social forums in cities around the world. A concern to globalize the WSF also has been evident in efforts by activists and organizers to expand or decentralize the world event itself by using new communication technologies to connect actors in different geographical locations. It is this use of communication technologies to construct networks within the WSF process that this article explores.

In what follows, I begin by briefly outlining two attempts at what may be described as “grassrooting” the WSF by bringing it closer to localized actors: the WSF 2008, which in place of a single world event took the form of a Global Day of Action with local activities taking place around the world; and Belém Expanded – an initiative that involved connecting groups in different locations to the WSF 2009 in Belém, Brazil, using videoconference technology. In both cases, it was media and communication that gave these decentralized activities a coherent framework. I then move on to explore in detail an event that provides a

different vantage point on the notion of expanding the WSF: the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries (*Fórum Social Expandido das Periferias*), a small social forum held in February 2010 in a poor urban neighbourhood in the southern Brazilian city of Pelotas, which also used videoconference technology to connect activist groups in different places. Through the analytical lens provided by recent scholarship that emphasizes the political and epistemological significance of place in a globalized world, I read efforts by the organizers of this forum to construct a “network of peripheries” through the use of new communication technologies as the expression of a complex politics of place that is simultaneously local and global in scope and which challenges traditional conceptions of scale as well as dominant epistemological paradigms.

### **“Grassrooting” the WSF: the Global Day of Action 2008 and Belém Expanded**

The idea of a completely decentralized WSF was first realized in 2008, when instead of one world event there was a week of mobilization culminating in a Global Day of Action (GDA) on 26 January, with over 1000 activities taking place in 80 countries. Media and communication were integral to the design of the GDA. In order to bring together and give visibility to the numerous activities taking place around the world, a website was created where activists could register and provide information about their actions in designated “spaces” which could be “visited” by others – an initiative which might be described as an attempt to recreate, in virtual form, the physical space usually provided by centralized WSF events. In addition to the website, members of the WSF Communication Commission also coordinated efforts to promote the GDA to international mainstream media, arranged alternative media coverage of the various issues being raised, and organized a set of live connections via Skype, coordinated from France and Catalonia, with activist groups around the world.

The GDA gave rise to the idea that the WSF 2009 also could have a decentralized component in the form of activities taking place simultaneously in other parts of the world, connected in real time to the Belém forum through videoconference technology. During the event, members of the Communication Commission coordinated a programme of activities – brought together under the moniker “Belém Expanded” – which incorporated live interconnections between participants at the forum site and activist groups in other places. Many of these groups had organized their own events in connection with the WSF, including meetings, rallies, and performances; these decentralized activities were conceived as part of an “expanded” social forum event encompassing a virtual as well as a physical “territory”. During the forum, 30 video conferences were held with activist groups in different parts of the world, including Europe, North and South America, Africa, and the Middle East.

The GDA and Belém Expanded provide interesting examples of efforts to “grassroot” the WSF by bringing it closer to localized actors through innovative use of new communication technologies. Clearly informed by a democratizing impulse, these initiatives provided ways to extend the “forum experience” beyond the world event itself to those who do not have the resources or inclination to travel. In this respect, they might be understood as attempts to realize the WSF’s ideals of openness and globality through communication technologies. However, the GDA and Belém Expanded still might be conceived as efforts to decentralize and expand the WSF “from the centre”, in the sense that they were initiated and coordinated by actors who occupy relatively central positions within the WSF and took the world event as their spatial and conceptual reference point. The Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries, by contrast, might be understood as an attempt by actors who occupy a more marginal position within the social forum process to expand the WSF “from the periphery”.

### **Connecting the peripheries: the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries**

The Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries was held in February 2010 in Dunas, a poor urban neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city of Pelotas in the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. The event was conceptualized as part of the WSF 2010, which – in accordance with the principle of decentralization – took the form of a series of local, regional, and thematic social forums taking place around the world throughout the year. Like Belém Expanded, the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries made use of videoconference technology to enable real-time audio-visual interconnections with groups in other geographical locations. Yet, as a social forum that differed both in qualitative and quantitative terms from the biennial world event, it provides a very different perspective on the idea of expanding the WSF.

Situated three hours by bus from the WSF's birthplace in Porto Alegre, Dunas is home to a predominantly Afro-Brazilian population of around 30,000. The neighbourhood suffers from problems that are common to Brazilian *favelas*: lack of basic infrastructure, low education levels, drug and alcohol addiction, and – not least – stigmatization in mainstream public opinion as a place of violence and lawlessness. However, Dunas also has had some infrastructure put in place in recent years, thanks in most part to the efforts of a well-organized community sector. The local community association, the Dunas Development Committee (*Comité de Desenvolvimento Dunas*, or CDD), which brings together a number of organizations operating in the neighbourhood, received financial support from a federal government project that enabled the construction of a community centre in 2006. This is home to a small library, a cluster of computers for Internet access, multimedia facilities, and meeting rooms. Adjacent are a sports stadium and a row of shops for local businesses, all of which are managed by CDD.

The Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries was held in and around the community centre and incorporated a range of activities, including a solidarity economy faire, cultural

and sports activities, and a children's forum – as well as seminars and debates on a range of issues. An initiative of the University of the Periphery (*Universidade da Periferia*), a grassroots education network that incorporates CDD and various other organizations working in Dunas and nearby areas, it was the latest in a series of social forums held in the neighbourhood over the previous decade.<sup>2</sup> Conceiving the event as part of a global social forum process, organizers adopted the concept of an expanded social forum from the WSF 2009 and made similar use of communication technologies. The majority of activities that formed part of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries were filmed and streamed live online, and many of the seminars incorporated live dialogues with activists in other parts of the world – including France, Spain, Colombia, Mexico, and the Amazon – using Skype video call and chat.

As its name suggests, the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries had as a key objective to connect different “peripheries”, the notion of the periphery being used to refer not only to geographical location but also to the condition of being marginalized and excluded.<sup>3</sup> Identifying Dunas as being on the periphery, the organizers aimed to establish and strengthen connections with other actors in analogous positions: from similar neighbourhoods in Pelotas to indigenous communities in the Amazon and housing rights activists from the *banlieus* of Paris. The rationale behind this was outlined by one organizer, a man in his fifties from the University of the Periphery, in the following terms:

We understand that it is necessary to act locally. But it's no use acting locally without a universal vision, without a vision of everything. And you cannot have a vision of everything without seeking articulations with other places, and exchanging experiences between different places (interview with author).<sup>4</sup>

Communication technologies are central to such forms of exchange. The use of videoconference technology to facilitate live audio-visual interactions between activists in different places was conceived explicitly by the same person as a means to facilitate bottom-up processes of convergence between different place-based knowledges:

When using technologies for sharing of information, for sharing of knowledges that are developed in different places but which in many cases arise from very similar necessities, these knowledges can be shared and transferred and reappropriated by communities in various parts of the world. And this communication makes possible a synthesis of knowledges which are worked out and developed in different regions, within different cultures (interview with author).

Emphasizing the importance of networking with other localities, these excerpts echo Castells' contention that the ability of social movements to create or influence global communication networks is crucial to their success. Observing that in the network society, networks of power are usually global while resistance is usually local, Castells asserts that "[h]ow to reach the global from the local, through networking with other localities – how to 'grassroot' the space of flows – becomes the key strategic question for the social movements of our age" (2009, 52). Like networks of power, alternative projects must also go through global communication networks to transform consciousness if they wish to effect social change: "it is only by acting on global discourses through the global communication networks that they can affect power relationships in the global networks that structure all societies" (53).

Seemingly heeding Castells' imperative to "go global", the organizers of the Expanded Forum of the Peripheries recognize the need to construct communication networks for knowledge exchange beyond their particular locality. However, they also see the politics

of communication as inextricably linked to the politics of place. Their networking strategies are intimately bound up with *place-making*; that is, with attempts to construct a particular sense of what Dunas is like as a place. For forum organizers in Dunas, the use of communication technologies is not simply about connecting already existing places with already formed knowledges, nor is it a matter of merely disseminating knowledge through disembodied global communication networks.

### **The political and epistemological significance of place**

The significance of their efforts to “connect the peripheries” through communication technologies can be elucidated by adopting an analytical perspective that emphasizes the political and epistemological significance of place in a globalized world. As Escobar argues, place often has been marginalized in debates about globalization, which have tended to equate the global with “space, capital, and the capacity to transform while the local is associated with place, labor, tradition, and hence with what will inevitably give way to more powerful forces” (2008, 30). Within such frameworks, “local” movements are frequently reduced to, at best, misguided struggles to defend traditional ways of life against modernizing forces, or, at worst, anti-modern fundamentalisms. In contrast to this privileging of the global, Escobar develops an understanding of place and the politics of place that many movements engage in as “key to our understanding of globalization” (15). This politics of place relies on place-making – cultural-political practices concerned with the production of meaning about a particular geographical territory – as a strategy for the defence of place against the delocalizing effects of global capital, but cannot be reduced to mere “resistance” to global forces.

Escobar (2007a) describes the struggles of many contemporary movements as place-based yet transnationalized, involving both the defence of local models of social life and

mobilizations involving the construction of coalitions at different geopolitical scales.

Osterweil conceptualizes this emergent politics as “place-based globalism” and contrasts it to a “universalizing globalist” perspective, according to which “effective resistance to neo-liberal capitalist globalization must come in the form of a united global movement that has moved *beyond* place-based and local struggles to occupy and constitute *an* alternative global space” (2005, 25). Place-based globalism, by contrast,

sees true or qualitative globality as comprised of many nodes, places, interconnections and relations that at no point are totally consolidated into a singular global entity.

Instead, in their diffuseness and local rootedness they touch and involve increasingly more parts of the globe (26).

In such a perspective, the place-based character of many contemporary movements does not have to equal insularity or backwardness. Rather, it might be conceived in terms of a positive project concerned with the construction of alternative political and epistemological imaginaries: “an expanding politics of diversity and recognition that acknowledges the multiplicity of alternative visions, values and world views, and the presence of existing ‘other worlds’” (Conway 2008, 223). The practices of such movements involve the production of knowledge that is “embedded in locality and that is responsive and accountable to place-based constituencies – as opposed to the detached expert knowledge of modernity” (Escobar 2007a, 286). This can be understood as what Santos refers to as “postmodern knowledge”: “knowledge about the conditions of possibility of human action projected into the world from local time-spaces” (2007, 36). Such a perspective highlights the centrality of place – understood both as a particular geographical territory and people’s culturally and historically

informed experience of, and engagement with, this territory –to the elaboration of alternative knowledge projects.

Conceptualized in epistemological terms, place thus becomes central to any understanding of what “knowledge from below” might mean in a globalized world. This can be elaborated with reference to the notion of the “colonial difference” associated with what is commonly referred to as the Latin American modernity/coloniality programme.<sup>5</sup> According to Mignolo (2000), the colonial difference refers to the space at the exteriority of the “modern/colonial world system”; “the space where *local* histories inventing and implementing global designs meet *local* histories, the space in which global designs have to be adapted, adopted, rejected, integrated, or ignored” (ix). Mignolo understands the colonial difference as a privileged site for the articulation of alternative knowledge projects – “the space where the restitution of subaltern knowledges is taking place and where border thinking is emerging” (ix). Considering the prospect of new macronarratives, based not on the quest for a counterpart to universal history or an alternative truth but on the search for a different logic, he envisages “an alternative to totality conceived as a network of local histories and multiple local hegemonies” (22).

### **Communication and the politics of place in Dunas**

Within such a framework, the communication practices of forum organizers in Dunas might be conceived as an attempt to speak from the colonial difference and construct alternative global imaginaries. The starting point for their project of “connecting the peripheries” through communication networks is a commitment to Dunas as a place: the majority have strong connections to the area, either as residents or as members of small organizations with long-term involvement in the community. Based on a sense that social transformation has to be grounded in the experiences of people on the ground rather than imposed from above,

organizers place a strong emphasis on valorizing local knowledges and practices, and their key objectives are to empower the local resident population and strengthen its capacity for autonomous organization.

Within this schema, the construction of communication networks is motivated by a concern to create a *sense* of globality, which can in turn be mobilized to give impetus to a place-based project of social transformation. A major challenge facing community organizers in Dunas is deep-seated internalized prejudice among local residents about the area in which they live. Dunas is represented in almost wholly negative terms in the local mainstream media, and with little access to alternative discourses, residents have few resources for constructing more positive self-representations. An important part of the rationale behind the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries was therefore to raise self-esteem and stimulate local residents to participate actively in collective efforts to improve the area. Incorporating video conferences with activists in other parts of the world into what was otherwise a fairly community-oriented event was conceived as an important part of this strategy, as one of the technical coordinators of the event, a man in his thirties, explained:

If the community realizes that it is [...] being seen, it is being looked at, that it is being visited by outsiders, the community has a tendency to like this more, to like and then care for and participate. So [...] at the basis of the proposal is this: to make people see that there are people from the outside coming here, to participate, to interact with us here. So it's not such a wretched place, it's not that bad living here. It's not that I don't want a better place to live, but it is better if everybody joins together and works to improve this place here, instead of abandoning it in favour of another place (interview with author).

Complex dynamics are at play here. On the one hand, it would appear that the capacity of the local community for transformative action depends on a validating gaze from the “centre”, brought by the physical and virtual presence of international participants (me as researcher included). Arguably, organizers’ deployment of “the periphery” as a political category might inadvertently reinscribe the marginality of Dunas, insofar as their project of connecting the peripheries remains tied to a conventional centre-periphery model. On the other hand, their efforts to create a sense of Dunas as a place that is of interest to “outsiders” and connected to other places through communication technologies is in important ways about staking a claim for Dunas to be situated *in* the world and not simply relegated to the status of the local and marginal, as is usually the case. This sentiment is reflected in one of the main slogans of the forum – *Dunas Mundo no Mundo Dunas* – an approximate English translation of which might be “Dunas in the world, the world in Dunas”. The technical coordinator quoted above explained the slogan in the following terms:

It's this connection to... it's more in the other sense, of bringing the world inside, but not necessarily the outside world. It is to transform Dunas in the world, in its own world, with its own life that... ventures outside, which shares with this other outside world. It is also about bringing this world [to Dunas] but not to live according to this world. It is about generating conditions in which we can guide this outside world, and not have the outside world tell Dunas how it should behave (interview with author).

Part of the purpose of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries, then, was to construct a sense of Dunas being *part* of the global, not just a locality that is impacted upon by global forces originating elsewhere. Significantly, the organizers’ use of communication technologies to connect with people in other parts of the world was about creating a

conception of Dunas as a place from which knowledge emanates. For a few days, the forum inverted conventional notions of centre and periphery, temporarily placing Dunas at the centre of the world. It was Dunas – not the global WSF event – that was “expanded”. This notion was invoked explicitly by one organizer who got up on stage during the forum's closing event to announce that it was broadcast live online and exclaim that “tonight, Dunas is at the centre of the world!”

In the longer term, the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries forms part of ongoing efforts to create and strengthen communication networks between Dunas and other “peripheries”. The forum provided an occasion for reaffirming already existing relationships as well as for establishing new links, and – not least – to stimulate ongoing dialogue and the formulation of joint strategies beyond the event itself. However, the *sense* of globality and connectedness invoked by the use of videoconference technology was just as important as the actual connections that were made and the content that was exchanged within them. The organizers' innovative use of new communication technologies to create an understanding of Dunas as an important node in global networks is connected to broader efforts to increase self-esteem and encourage a sense of protagonism among the local population. A sense of belonging to the global thus becomes an important resource for a project for social transformation that takes Dunas as its focal point.

The process of social transformation envisaged by the organizers is grounded in place-based knowledges and practices, developed by and for the local population and starting from its particular needs and experiences. Practising a prefigurative politics – “modes of organisation that deliberately demonstrate the world you want to create” (Grubacic 2004, 37) – they understand knowledge production as inextricably bound up with efforts to implement alternative modes of social organization. One organizer, a man in his thirties from *Amiz*, an

organization set up by students at the Federal University of Pelotas for working with the community in Dunas, gave the following example:

We can set up a clothes manufacturing business here which doesn't have a boss who decides, who is going to exploit people. We can set up an enterprise where people are responsible even when there is nobody who tells them what to do, which is part of a dialogic process. This is a form of truth, a way of knowing differently, of thinking that “yes, I can”, and starting from ourselves here in Dunas, begin to think that we can look after the neighbourhood, that we don't have to wait for the public authorities (interview with author).

An idea of truth as produced through practice, through actively *creating* social reality, is at work here. This truth-making is at the same time place-making, focused on the locality as the particular site in which social transformation is effected.

Another slogan used by forum organizers captured this well. A play on the WSF slogan, the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries asserted that “another world is *here*”. The organizer from *Amiz* explained the thinking behind this in the following terms:

The “here” is [...] the idea that, yes, another world is possible, but where is it that it is happening? It is happening here. So “another world is here” is the answer for us, for our place. So it is here that we are going to act, where we reside, where we live, where we love. It is here that we make the transformation, here that is the other possible world. It's not there. It is here, where we are (interview with author).

The implications of this are twofold. First, it highlights the primacy of place; the notion that social transformation is not an abstract process that occurs elsewhere. The assertion that “another world is *here*” makes it clear that social transformation has to *start from* concrete local realities and practices. Second, it suggests that another world is *already* here; that the kind of social relations that organizers wish to construct already exist – albeit in embryonic form – in Dunas. As the president of CDD, a young woman in her twenties from Dunas, explained:

We started to think, “ah, another world is here”, right? Because Dunas [...] is a privileged neighbourhood, various cool things happen here, we have various committed people [...]. You could see that the community is a poor community but it is a joyful community, right? Nothing happened, we had four days of the forum and we had no problems. The kids turned up, we can't exclude anyone in the process, regardless of who they are. So it is because of this that another world is here, because the situation is different here, the movement is different; the movement is one of inclusion. This is why it is “another world is here” (interview with author).

### **Conclusion: reconceptualizing networks, place, and scale**

The emphasis that organizers of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries put on place highlights that what is at stake in their use of communication technologies is the creation of networks between different place-based actors and the construction of a sense of globality which does not entail abandoning a commitment to place. It is not about the construction of disembodied global networks that exist *above* particular places, nor an imaginary in which the global is privileged at the expense of the local. Rather, the global – constituted in and

through translocal connections achieved through innovative use of new communication technologies – becomes a resource for empowering local struggles.

This place-based yet global politics challenges conventional understandings of place and scale, in which the local is conceived as physically bounded and nested within hierarchies of scale. By seeking – through the use of new communication technologies – to establish translocal connections with other place-based actors engaged in similar struggles, the forum organizers practice what Sassen refers to as an “emergent global politics” that is “global through the knowing multiplication of local practices” (2006, 375). As the notion of place-based globalism (Osterweil 2005) suggests, the idea of globality need not only refer to phenomena that are self-evidently global in scale; practices like the ones described here might also be considered global in that they involve efforts to insert a particular locality in global social and political processes through the creation of transnational networks with actors in analogous positions (Sassen 2007). Through their use of communication technologies, community organizers in Dunas seek to generate a sense of participation in struggles that are globally distributed. Though they remain focused on their particular place, they explicitly frame their struggles as similar to those of multiple other communities around the world and seek to connect with such communities.

Such a reconceptualization of place and scale has implications for the epistemological paradigms through which we understand the knowledge production that these activists seek to facilitate. Within a conventional framework, it might be conceived as local and particularistic, as opposed to more universal and disembodied “global” knowledge. However, the practices described here challenge such a rigid dichotomy between the particular (local) and the universal (global) as well as the hierarchy between them. The organizers of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries want to empower the production of knowledge that is place-based, but not *place-bound*. By using communication technologies to construct

networks in which local knowledges can be shared, they seek to enable the production of “postmodern knowledge” projected into the world from local time-spaces, to use Santos’s terminology.

The practices described in this article demonstrate what the process of constructing alternative epistemological imaginaries along the lines envisaged by Santos and Mignolo might look like in practice, and the fundamental contribution of communication technologies to such a project. However, the construction of communication networks is about more than connecting already existing places and facilitating exchange of already formed local knowledges between them. As we have seen, a particular sense of Dunas as a place that is part of the global is achieved through the construction of communication networks in which it is an important node. This in turn has the potential to empower autonomous knowledge production and give impetus to a process of social transformation carried out by and for the local community. Through the use of communication technologies, organizers seek to make visible and validate subalternized knowledges, and to inspire among residents a sense of protagonism and capacity to effect social transformation. Their efforts to simultaneously bring the world to Dunas *and* stake a claim for Dunas to be positioned *in* the world illustrate the complex dynamics involved in carving out a locus of enunciation for a community that has been marginalized by hegemonic globalization.

The deployment of the category of “the periphery” by organizers of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries might, on the one hand, function to reinscribe the community’s marginality. On the other hand, their concern to “expand” their own social forum rather than simply seek inclusion in the WSF arguably also functions to de-centre the biennial world event itself. At least, it raises profound questions about how the “open space” of the WSF is to be conceptualized, and holds out the possibility that “expanding” the social forum process is as much about facilitating the proliferation of autonomous knowledge

projects among place-based actors around the world as it is about enabling their inclusion in the global event. The use of communication technologies to “connect the peripheries” clearly is fundamental to such a project, as a means to facilitate information exchange through global communication networks, but also as a way to construct an alternative sense of globality that can give impetus to place-based struggles.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For key arguments in this debate, see for example Patomaki and Teivainen (2004), Teivainen (2004), Wallerstein (2004), Whitaker (2008), as well as contributions to the special issue on the WSF of the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29.2 (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Dunas hosted its first social forum in late 2000, inspired by the preparations for the inaugural WSF in nearby Porto Alegre, which was held in January 2001. Forums held in Dunas since then include the Dunas Social Forum (*Fórum Social Dunas*) in 2006, the Social Forum of the Communities of Rio Grande (*Fórum Social das Comunidades do Rio Grande*) in 2007, and the Social Forum of the Periphery (*Fórum Social da Periferia*) in 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of “the periphery” has a particular meaning in the Brazilian context. In general usage, it refers to areas located on the outskirts of big cities and is loaded with connotations of deprivation and poverty. “The periphery” is also claimed as a political identity by many

urban social movements wishing to redefine the concept and condition of being on the margins in positive terms.

<sup>4</sup> All interview quotes have been translated from Portuguese by the author.

<sup>5</sup> The modernity/coloniality programme is associated primarily with the work of Argentine/Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel, Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano and Argentine/US cultural theorist Walter Mignolo. Coloniality, in this framework, refers to the “underside” of modernity – “those subaltern knowledges and cultural practices world-wide that modernity itself shunned, suppressed, made invisible and disqualified” (Escobar, “Beyond the Third World” 210) – which has existed alongside modernity since the conquest of the Americas and is, fundamentally, constitutive of it (Mignolo). See Escobar (for a critical overview).

### **Notes on contributor**

Hilde C. Stephansen is a Research Associate in the Department of Politics & International Studies at The Open University. Previously, she has taught in the Department of Sociology and worked as a researcher in the Department of Media & Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research focuses on how communication practices of various kinds are implicated in social processes of knowledge production. She received a PhD in Sociology in 2012 for a thesis that explored the character and significance of media and communication in the World Social Forum, focusing on their relationship to knowledge production and to politics of place and scale.

### **Address:**

Faculty of Social Sciences

The Open University

Walton Hall

Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

United Kingdom

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