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The Neasden Protocol - Keith Kahn-Harris

The movement

I don't know if this is the most creative period in human history, but there were certainly times in 2011 when it felt that way. Almost every day, I discovered a new initiative, protest or startup that was trying to remake the world, in whole or in part. Even before Occupy was born, and even excluding the more complex examples of the Arab Spring, it was clear that 2011 was a time of radical experimentation and empowerment. Perhaps this was a reaction to the sheer despair of the economic and environmental situation? Or, more prosaically, a fulfillment of the potential of new, internet-based forms of social organisation?

Back in June 2011 - and note that this was before the Occupy movement began - I suggested in an article for Open Democracy that a new kind of movement was developing:

No one institution or individual embodies it. It is rather a trend, a direction, an idea-virus, a meme, a source of energy that can be traced through a large number of spaces and projects. It is also a way of thinking and acting: an agility, an adaptability, a refusal to accept the world as it is, a refusal to get stuck into fixed patterns of thought.^[1]

Crucially, this movement is largely not conscious of itself as a movement. This is a reflection of its diffuseness and its resistance to centralised control. Potentially, this is a source of resilience and robustness, but nothing is guaranteed. The lack of self-consciousness may mean that the movement ultimately dissolves into a mass of unconnected, vulnerable initiatives, amounting to less than the sum of their parts.

For that reason, I suggested it was time to think about how to 'name' the movement. The very process of attempting to name such a thing may increase its self-consciousness. I didn't suggest what the name should be and, in a way, this wasn't the point. My article sparked a lively conversation in a number of publications and blogs, until the birth of Occupy began to dominate discussion of these matters.

The conversation

One of the most interested outcomes of the publication of the 'Naming the movement' article was a discussion convened by Steve Wheeler on 4 July 2011, mischievously called 'Interdependence Day'. Steve had been thinking and writing along similar lines to me on his blog, Steelweaver.^[2] The conversation took place, appropriately enough, in a legally-squated church hall in - of all places - Neasden, North London. Present, along with Steve and I, were Alan Chapman, Nick Stewart, Alex Fradera, Vinay Gupta and Eleanor Saitta (the last two via Skype).

We had no fixed agenda and sought no definite outcome. Nevertheless, the conversation became more focused as it proceeded. Being broadly in agreement that something important was happening right now, and that this 'something' needed support, we began to address the tricky, paradoxical questions that the movement

raises: how do we spread and nurture the movement when it is, by definition, resistant to centralised control? How do we increase the self-consciousness of the movement, without homogenising and directing it? How can we articulate a set of principles that are neither too general to be useful, nor too explicit to be responsive to particular circumstances?

The protocol

At some point we came up with the idea of a 'protocol', a series of practices and principles that could be freely shared and adopted in a wide range of settings. This protocol would be flexible enough to be used by initiatives with different degrees of institutionalisation, at different degrees of scale, with different kinds of priorities. It would also be explicit enough to act as a forceful and challenging call to practice in a particular way.

One model for such a protocol is Alcoholics Anonymous. AA has no centralised structure, yet it is a global movement that marries a high degree of consistency from place to place with a flexibility that allows the model to be easily adapted to a variety of circumstances and issues. At the heart of AA and related groups is a core set of principles and practices - the 12 steps, etc. - that provide a toolkit that anyone can make use of. The protocol aims at this ubiquity, while recognising the daunting odds against this happening.

Although the constituent elements of the protocol were developed through a group discussion, I was the one who eventually worded it in its most explicit form and was probably the most enthusiastic about it. So while not exactly claiming ownership of the protocol, I take responsibility for the particular form it has taken. In the spirit of the movement, the protocol can be freely adapted and adopted, with or without acknowledgment.

So here it is:

The Neasden Protocol

Facing outward:

- **Reach out** - *We continually strive to make new connections with others.*
- **Meet up** - *Our relationships will be more than virtual.*
- **Scale up** - *We aspire to change more than our immediate surroundings. Our work will always be a prototype for work elsewhere.*

Facing inward:

- **Take care** - *We are concerned for the well-being of each other.*
- **Take time** - *We create space amid the flow of everyday life.*
- **Take turns** - *We rotate leadership roles regularly.*

Commentary

To the extent that the protocol's prospects will be determined by its comprehensibility - or lack thereof - the more explanation it needs, the less useful it is. If it seems either overly enigmatic or overly obvious, then do not use it! The protocol must take its place within the free(ish) market of ideas. I would, though, like to highlight one clear plus and one clear minus to the protocol.

The plus is that its principles would seem to be just as applicable to a handful of friends in a book group and to a multinational NGO. Aspiring simultaneously to outward-facing change-making and to an inward-facing, mindful ethics would seem to be a good idea, no matter what the size and complexity of one's collective.

The negative is that the protocol lacks an overarching statement of values or ideology. It could, in theory at least, be appropriated by fundamentalist or extremist groups. The lack of ideological explicitness is a due to the impossibility of pinning down the movement's principles beyond bland statements.

The question

So that is the Neasden Protocol. If it works for you, use it. If you can build on it, do. We hold it out lightly and wait to see whether this will be the first of many iterations, or the first and last, because either way we have learned from the process of its creation.

1. Keith Kahn-Harris, 'Naming the movement', *openDemocracy*, 22 June 2011 - <http://www.opendemocracy.net/keith-kahn-harris/naming-movement>
2. Steve Wheeler, 'Building a (modular) thought tank', *Steelweaver*, 15 June 2011 - <http://steelweaver.tumblr.com/post/6555903174/building-a-modular-thought-tank>