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**“CHANGING THE WORLD ONE LAZY-ASSED MOUSE CLICK
AT A TIME”: EXPLORING THE VIRTUAL SPACES OF
VIRTUALISM IN UK THIRD SECTOR SUSTAINABLE
CONSUMPTION ADVOCACY**

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Individuals are increasingly urged to 'do their bit' to address a suite of contemporary environmental, social and economic crises including climate change, peak oil and unfair trade. Consumption has been constructed as an important means by which individuals can tackle these issues, and third sector organisations occupy a key role as advocates supporting individuals in this quest. These advocacy groups and organisations are increasingly using the Internet to reach their publics, where this electronic form of advocacy – or 'e-advocacy' – encourages and makes possible particular kinds of actions, and consequently shapes our understanding of what sustainable consumption and being a sustainable consumer involves. I propose a typology of five main types of actions promoted in this sustainable consumption e-advocacy, and with reference to Daniel Miller and James Carrier's theory of Virtualism I argue that this e-advocacy demonstrates a peculiarly 'virtual' form of Virtualism so far undescribed in the literature.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, virtual space, Virtualism, third-sector organisations, advocacy

This is a place for anyone who would like to do something about climate change, or sweatshops, or eating better food, but, well, you know... busy, things come up... here's the deal, one thing a month. Sign up to get nagged each month about one easy thing you can do to be greener, cleaner and, if you're not careful, a tiny bit smug. (The Nag 2008)

'The Nag' is one of the main online sustainable consumption advocacy tools of Anti Apathy, a third sector¹ organisation that sets out to "find an issue that's just not being talked about enough... [and] make it accessible, appealing and, well, a bit more human again" (Anti Apathy, 2008). In this, Anti Apathy appears to respond to critiques that sustainable consumption advocacy tends to be unintelligible and off-putting to much of the public (e.g. Fell & Cox 2004, Darnton 2005), and uses the Internet and the specific arrays of advocacy tools brought together on its website to make advocacy more meaningful and accessible. The Nag breaks sustainable consumption into a number of composite actions (or 'nags') to be tackled one at a time, bundling bite-sized chunks of information with guidance on what to do next. To get a picture of how The Nag constructs sustainable consumption and what individuals must do to become sustainable consumers, I will describe the constellation of 'nags' presented on The Nag's website in September 2008. At this time, the site was divided into two sets of 'nags' – those produced by The Nag themselves, and those produced by registered users of the website ('Do It Yourself [DIY] nags'), with most emphasis on the former. The Nag's own 'nags' seem to fall into two types. The first focuses on individual consumption choices, which

include: switching to green energy; signing up for a local, organic food box; taking your own lunch to work to tackle lunch packaging waste; and buying Scottish-grown snowdrops for Valentine's day rather than imported roses. Both the food box and the snowdrop 'nags' contain links to suppliers, so that visitors to the site can purchase these 'sustainable' products immediately. Other 'nags' require forms of political action (in particular, lobbying) from the individual: the 'clothes nag' invites website visitors to email their favourite clothes shop to ask that it sells 'guilt-free' (described as being made from organic cotton and/or fairly traded) clothes, while the 'holiday nag' invites us to use The Nag's 'automatic nagging machine' (which generates a template email to send to the transport minister) to demand that rail travel is made cheaper than air travel. Complementing these lists of 'nags' are figures representing the number of people pledging to undertake each of them (figure 1) - or in the case of monitorable actions like sending protest emails through the website, or purchasing products through the links presented on the site, it displays actual numbers of times actions have been undertaken.

[figure 1]

In the context of this paper and sustainable consumption advocacy more generally, several important things are going on here. Part of the action advocated on The Nag website is that visitors need to *get informed* about the problems leading to unsustainability, and the means by which different facets of consumption can be made sustainable. Individuals registering with the site also have the ability to *discuss issues*, and can contribute to shaping the discourse by submitting their own 'DIY nags' on issues and actions that they think are important. There is also a degree of *sustainability accounting* in the form of making pledges to act, where these pledges are recorded in individual user accounts and from here are collated to demonstrate The Nag's collective success. The website also supports the practice of *sustainable consumerism* (a combination of ethical and green consumerism), where we are encouraged to purchase our groceries from one particular retailer and our snowdrops from another, all achievable directly through the website. Finally, individuals are invited to *take political action*, using tools on the website to contact clothes retailers and politicians alike to press for change. These five types of action - getting informed, discussing issues, sustainability accounting, sustainable consumerism and political action - recur in some combination or another throughout the third sector e-advocacy considered here. Moreover, as illustrated by an almost throwaway line on The Nag's website—"feed cat, recycle phone, change world, note to self: change life ☺" (The Nag 2008)—this kind of e-advocacy carries with it the implicit understanding that small changes made by individuals in their everyday lives lead inexorably to sustainability on a wider scale.

In this paper I argue that such simplistic models of sustainable consumption – which in turn rely upon abstract, limited visions of the roles and capabilities of individuals as consumers – serve to maintain a consumerist, market-driven, consumption-oriented status quo. Aspects of this argument relating to the discursive constructions mobilised in sustainable consumption have begun to be explored and debated in the discipline (e.g. Hinchliffe 1996; Hobson 2003, 2002; Clarke et al 2007; Thomas 2008; Bryant & Goodman 2004). In building on this body of work, I want look more closely at how sustainable consumption and sustainable consumers are being constructed in the new ‘virtual’ spaces of the Internet, and consider whether the Internet – which is often hailed as having emancipatory potential and the ability to make information more interesting and accessible – allows (or doesn’t allow) sustainable consumption advocates to transcend some of the limitations associated with physical, face-to-face or paper-based advocacy. Furthermore, in exploring how we are, apparently, now able to “chang[e] the world one lazy-assed mouse click at a time” as The Nag so eloquently puts it (The Nag 2008), I utilise the theory of Virtualism developed in the work of Daniel Miller and James Carrier to understand the ways and means by which third sector organisations are constructing what counts as sustainable consumption and sustainable consumers. Put another way, the new, expanding and important virtual spaces of e-advocacy are in a sense doubly virtual, in that they variably exhibit some of the tenets of Miller and Carrier’s Virtualism whereby green consumers are universalised and abstracted by these groups. This paper sets out to explore the new, online sources of e-advocacy for sustainable consumption through the theoretical lens of Virtualism.

The paper continues as follows. First, I very briefly describe the evolution of sustainable consumption advocacy from its early days to its contemporary electronic, online forms in the guise of what I am calling ‘e-advocacy’. I then introduce and explore the concept of Virtualism as developed in the work of Miller and Carrier (Miller 2003, 2000, 1998; Carrier 1998) and discuss how it offers us useful purchase on understanding these new frontiers of e-advocacy. Third, I explore the actions advocated by third-sector groups and organisations in getting people to consume more sustainably, divided into the following five key activities: getting informed, discussing issues, sustainability accounting, sustainable consumerism and political action. I discuss whether, and to what extent, these five key activities exhibit characteristics of Miller and Carrier’s theory of Virtualism. Fourth, the paper entertains a wider discussion about the cultural politics of the environment as developed and created by third sector groups and organisations in the UK mobilising e-advocacy to drive sustainable consumption.

Sustainable consumption, the third sector and the virtual spaces of the Internet

Just what is sustainable consumption? Our modern, Western, resource-intensive lifestyles are considered to be unsustainable due to their reliance on finite resources, which in turn is associated with negative environmental impacts and domestic and international inequality (e.g. Jackson 2006, Luke 1997). Reflecting a sense of urgency uniting this discourse, sustainable consumption has become a policy priority at the international level (e.g. *Agenda 21* (United Nations 1992) and *Sustainable Consumption and Production in the European Union* (European Communities 2004)) and at the level of the UK (e.g. *Securing the Future* (The Stationery Office 2005) and *Changing Patterns* (Defra 2003)). In these policy documents the third sector is identified as a key delivery agent in the quest to engage members of the public with taking personal action for sustainability in our everyday lives through modified patterns of consumption. Third sector organisations thus occupy a key role as ‘experts’ on sustainable consumption, and therefore have an important role in shaping how we come to see sustainable consumption and how we come to think about the things we need to do to become a sustainable consumer.

Before the advent of the Internet, advocacy typically took the form of face-to-face and paper-based advice and information. But even before the widespread popular uptake of the Internet the mass media was recognised as a significant locus of environmental advocacy (e.g. Hjelmar 1996). More recently, in his review of NGO environmental advocacy, Hounsham (2006) argues that for many individuals seeking information on sustainability issues, an NGO’s website is the first port of call. Today, many of third sector groups and organisations are utilising the Internet as a key means of reaching their publics, where the Internet is becoming a significant campaigning space in a range of socio-political contexts (e.g. Foot & Schneider 2006). The characteristics of the Internet sets e-advocacy apart from offline forms of advocacy, enabling advocates to (often dynamically) bring together arrays of different sources, interpretations and explanations by using virtual tools and techniques. There are four notable differences between online and offline advocacy. First, where paper-based or face-to-face advocacy requires individuals to be in the immediate vicinity of advocates, e-advocacy is by its very nature disembedded from physical places enabling advocates and individuals to be physically and temporally distant. Second, it is possible to rapidly alter, add to or remove web-based advocacy information, in contrast to paper-based advocacy that is comparatively more permanent. Rapidly changing advocacy material allows advocates to be more responsive to emerging issues and arguments and to quickly construct and reconstruct campaigns, and can enable individuals to get up-to-date information on issues that interest them. Third, e-advocacy alters the way that users interact with

information. Printed documents are typically ordered in a particular way by authors, and readers are typically encouraged to follow this in linear fashion. In contrast, pages of text on the Internet may contain hyperlinks to other sections, other pages and indeed even other documents of various types, enabling and implicitly encouraging individuals to jump from one part of the text to another, or even to leave the website entirely in pursuit of related information. This allows the reader to construct their own collections of elements of these texts, in a sense allowing them to shape the advocacy material that they engage with online. Fourth, the recent advent of web 2.0 technology has altered again the kinds of interactions possible in the medium such that two-way communication is increasingly possible, enabling web-users to both develop and contribute content - not just in what Bruns & Jacobs (2006) refer to as the 'blogosphere' (that is, content created by 'ordinary' people in their weblogs or 'blogs'), but also on organisations' own websites in discussion fora and blogs.

This suite of differences throws up some points worth considering relating to abstraction, accessibility and the intrinsic support of certain kinds of consumption. First, let's consider abstraction. As discussed earlier, whilst on the one hand, e-advocacy enables individuals to have fast, cost-effective access to information, the medium of the Internet allows this e-advocacy to become impersonal and potentially transient. In this, e-advocacy - like the market relationships described by Carrier (1998) - may serve to further abstract the individual from social or environmental interaction (this point is further developed below). Second, the accessibility of e-advocacy could also be critiqued. There is some support in the literature for the idea of the Internet as being a democratic and participatory space, where individuals are able to have equal access and control over cyberspace (e.g. Miller 2000). However, despite a massive increase in uptake of home and workplace Internet access, in the UK at least it is still not the case that everyone has access to the Internet and, by extension, these virtual spaces of e-advocacy. In fact, there remains evidence of a 'digital divide' with disparities in Internet access according to region, basic skills and social factors (National Statistics 2006)², reinforcing the gulf between the information-rich (the 'knows') and the information-poor (the 'know nots') (e.g. Reisch 2001). Access to the Internet is, however, only one aspect of the accessibility problem: despite the widespread availability of sophisticated search engine tools, in order to reach this e-advocacy individuals need to already be sufficiently interested in the issues in order to use appropriate keywords as search terms, or to be sufficiently acquainted with the organisations and groups hosting this e-advocacy such that they can locate the appropriate websites and from there locate the relevant information. This, perhaps, supports Clarke et al's (2007) contention that much of sustainable consumption advocacy focuses on preaching to the converted. Third, the implicit support of particular types of consumption relating to Internet use and its associated paraphernalia is a key

aspect of e-advocacy. Where offline forms of advocacy might necessitate the consumption of printed paper materials, e-advocacy requires the use of a computer of some description (or other electronic device) to access the Internet which in turn is associated with certain kinds of resource consumption, not just in use (electricity) but in manufacture (embodied energy, material extraction) and distribution (transport fuel). Whilst it is distinctly unlikely that anyone would invest in a computer and access to the Internet specifically to access sustainable consumption e-advocacy, the use of this resource-intensive medium subtly legitimises these kinds of consumption. Perhaps we might consider invocations to unplug electrical devices not in use, to donate unwanted electrical items to charities and local schools, and to adopt various energy efficiency measures – themes that are present in some of this e-advocacy – as a kind of offset, although it is debatable whether such offsets, consciously or unconsciously deployed, compensate for the computer use associated with e-advocacy consumption.

Setting this critique of e-advocacy to one side for the moment, it remains that the Internet is increasingly used as a key site in the cultural politics of sustainable consumption in the UK, being utilised by third sector groups and organisations as an advocacy medium. Before getting into a more sustained discussion of what the terms of e-advocacy are, how and by which groups and organisations they are being defined, and how these moves are quickly developing into a particularly ‘virtual’ form of politics, I explore a different but related sense of the ‘virtual’ in the concept of *Virtualism*. It is this concept, based on innovative work linking political economy and consumption, that forms the main theoretical lens through which I explore sustainable consumption e-advocacy.

Virtualism in the spaces of the virtual

Developed principally by the anthropologists Daniel Miller and James Carrier, the theory of ‘Virtualism’ arose from their observations that contemporary capitalism has new and different characteristics that merit a new conceptual model of political economy (Miller 2000). Carrier and Miller’s Virtualism complements the roughly contemporaneous theory of ‘real virtuality’ developed by Castells (1997). Both theories – of ‘real virtuality’ and of ‘Virtualism’ – make the argument that contemporary economic organisation is different to that which came before it. Castells uses the phrase ‘real virtuality’ to encompass our globalised economic system and its relationship with a newly globalised communications network, particularly involving electronically mediated communication. In contrast, Virtualism as defined by Miller and Carrier has two key characteristics: the abstraction of economic activity, and the concurrent abstraction of consumers (Miller 2003). Economic models are seen as driving (rather than simply describing) economic relations, whereby real activity and behaviour is forced through various mechanisms to conform to the ideal

predicted by the model, if it is seen to deviate. Virtual counterparts replace consumers in these models, where it is these virtual consumers that drive the economic models in question rather than the real behaviour of real people in their role as consumers. Miller and Carrier's key point is that theoretically-derived and -driven economic models of the world, and particularly of consumers, begin to drive real-world processes, practices and politics rather than the other way around, such that work is done to remove real world 'imperfections' in order to make the real conform to the model (Carrier 1998). With Castell's 'real virtuality' in the background, in this paper I primarily focus on exploring the expressions and processes of Miller and Carrier's theory of Virtualism present in globalised networks of electronic communications, in the form of sustainable consumption e-advocacy.

The Virtualism talked about here has so far been identified in the structural adjustment model administered by the IMF and the World Bank, in retail mergers advocated by management consultancies, in university auditing processes and in the UK government's Best Value auditing process for local authorities (Miller 2000, 2003). Hughes (2004) has identified Virtualism in one aspect of sustainable consumption – specifically, in the ethical trading initiatives associated with the Kenya Flower Council. This particular instance of ethical consumption constructs cut flowers certified by the Kenya Flower Council as being a form of sustainable consumption, through efforts to re-embed the social and economic wellbeing of producers in the purchase of these ethically produced flowers. Ethical trading initiatives have arisen as a response to trading arrangements that see producers treated unfairly, and have been driven by NGOs through media campaigns and negotiations with governments and industry – not by consumers of cut flowers. In order to demonstrate that a trading initiative is indeed ethical, NGOs have been instrumental in setting up what Hughes describes as a new 'audit economy' where producers are audited in an effort to guarantee minimum standards for environmental and social conditions, which depend upon intricate systems of monitoring and evaluation. Hughes' central argument is that it is this auditing procedure that has come to define the ideal model of what ethical trade is, to which trade is required to conform; and it is NGOs and supermarkets, standing as virtual consumers, that replace real cut flower consumers in this process – indeed, real consumers are, according to Hughes, rarely even made aware of the logos associated with these certified cut flowers. Whilst Virtualism is not inevitably a 'bad' thing – clearly moves in the direction of making trade more ethical, however flawed, are more positive regarding equity than the status quo – we can see here that Virtualism removes consumers from the project of sustainable consumption, whereby NGOs and supermarkets stand in for them as sovereign consumers driving systems of production and consumption. It is this dual incidence of conformity to idealised models, and the substitution of virtual consumers for real consumers, that I use

as a working definition of Virtualism in my exploration of the virtual spaces of sustainable consumption advocacy in this paper.

Virtual Virtualism, consumption and negation

In the theory of Virtualism, consumption figures quite large. Miller (1998) argues that consumption has the potential to negate the abstraction and alienation associated with capitalism by providing individuals with the means (in the form of an increasing array of commodities) to express their diversity and to achieve material wellbeing on a level equivalent to the capitalists of Marx's time:

It is (through consumption) that the smallest social groups, even individuals, confront objects that, in their production, express the very abstraction of the market and the state. Yet, through purchase and possession, people can use those objects to create worlds that strive to be specific and diverse precisely because we wish to escape from our sense of alienation from the vast institutions of the market and the state. (Miller, 1998:192)

Economic models, driven by academic economists and driving world processes, have led to a Virtualised political economy according to this theory. Supplanting real consumers with their virtual counterparts in these idealised models of consumption and production and their associated processes of auditing has, so argues Miller (2000), negated this negation of the alienation associated with capitalism. This second order negation has been linked to ever-increasing consumption, the increasing gap between the rich and poor, and the increasing autonomy and abstraction of institutions reinforcing these processes (Miller 2000, 2001). Interestingly, Miller (2000) sees the Internet as a countervailing power to the abstractions of consumers associated with Virtualism. For him, the Internet is actually less prone to Virtualism due to its open source nature and the ability for most people to gain control of it and to maintain it, to "appropriate the Internet and turn it back into high plural and meaningful worlds" (Miller 2000:211). It seems that, if this is the case, then the Internet can help to de-virtualise individuals, perhaps able to stand as a negation of the 'negation of the negation' (in other words, as a third order negation).

I engage with the Virtualism literature in two ways here. First, if Virtualism in the form of the 'negation of the negation' is associated with unsustainable consumption, could sustainable consumption be a kind of third order negation, a means of re-embedding abstracted consumers in processes of consumption and prioritising real consumption as opposed to idealised models? Second, I question Miller's assertion that the Internet is free from Virtualism. I argue that sustainable consumption e-advocacy demonstrates a particular kind of 'virtual Virtualism' – virtual because it is online, occupying the virtual spaces of the Internet. I have already shown that not everyone has

the ability to gain control of the Internet and transform it into plural, meaningful worlds. I go on to argue that, for sustainable consumption at least, it is impossible to separate this virtual advocacy from processes of sustainable consumption and production extant in the physical world, which are themselves entwined with Virtualism. The e-advocacy I consider in this analysis seems to span a spectrum of virtuality. At one end of this spectrum, in the online discourses controlled by third sector organisations and groups, individuals (or 'real' consumers) are required to conform to the figure of the virtual 'sustainable consumer' that in turn depends upon an idealised model of sustainable consumption. At the other end, these discourses are increasingly open (through the integration of web 2.0 technology) to being shaped by 'real' consumers themselves, who have a role in co-constructing what sustainable consumers and sustainable consumption actually *is* – and it is these online discourses that are closer to (though not necessarily a perfect example of) Miller's conceptualisation of a de-virtualised virtual reality. This spectrum of virtuality brings together different idealised models of sustainable consumption and consumers, defining and bounding what sustainable consumption is and who sustainable consumers are and, importantly, how these are supposed to work and be put into practice. Before exploring this spectrum of virtuality in detail, I will first introduce my methodological approach.

A five part typology of sustainable consumption e-advocacy

During 2007 and 2008 I collated details of over a hundred third sector groups and organisations advocating sustainable consumption to the UK public, using a combination of personal knowledge, snowball sampling, targeted web searches and participation in electronic discussion groups. For the purposes of the current paper I have selected a subset of twenty-five groups and organisations – from local grassroots groups (e.g. East Anglia Food Link) to international institutionalised NGOs (e.g. WWF), to those working across a diverse range of sustainable consumption-related issues including tourism (e.g. Tourism Concern), transportation (e.g. Campaign for Better Transport), food (e.g. Food Up Front), consumption (e.g. Ethical Consumer Guide) and water (e.g. Tap). Table 1 presents the full list of groups in the sample.

[table 1]

Each of these groups and organisations utilises, to some extent, the Internet as an advocacy space. In choosing this particular set of organisations, I wanted the sample to be broad in focus and diverse in nature in order to allow me to usefully describe and analyse general trends. Informed by critical discourse analysis, I explored these instances

of e-advocacy with a view to identifying the particular ways that these sites discursively construct the figure of the sustainable consumer and the model of sustainable consumption. In this analysis I found that a key element of these discursive constructions of sustainable consumers and consumption is the constellation of actions that these advocacy sites tell us we must undertake. These actions can be grouped into five categories:

- ❖ Getting informed (e.g. by reading information on the websites);
- ❖ Discussing issues and actions (e.g. by contributing to discussion boards and commenting on posted items);
- ❖ Taking part in ‘sustainability accounting’ (e.g. by which I mean pledges to act, recording actions, and calculations of carbon or ecological footprints);
- ❖ Sustainable consumerism (e.g. via the promotion of green or ethical products and the provision of opportunities to purchase them online); and
- ❖ Political action (e.g. in the form of e-petitions, emailing key figures (e.g. MPs or businesses) asking for change, or taking part in protests).

In the rest of this paper I will describe each of these five types of action, exploring how they demonstrate elements of Virtualism as defined by Miller and Carrier. I begin with *getting informed*.

Getting informed

There are two main ways that information can be present online: either as a form of one-way communication (where website visitors read information presented by the author of the website) or as two-way communication (where authors and readers can both participate in creating the text). Each of these types of e-advocacy requires different kinds of action from the website visitor, and so will be treated separately: in this section I consider the former, where e-advocacy requires individuals to relatively passively get informed by reading information about issues and appropriate actions provided by the group or organisation in their role as ‘expert’. The next section considers the latter type of e-advocacy.

‘Getting informed’ is by far the most common advocacy strategy, employed by each of the twenty-five e-advocacy websites in this analysis. All websites have a role in communicating information of some kind, and so inevitably sustainable consumption e-advocacy websites tend to incorporate information on ‘issues’ and ‘actions’ for sustainable living. In most cases, this information is interwoven throughout the site. Some sites provide dedicated pages of this kind of information – for example, the Centre

for Alternative Technology (CAT 2008) labels a corner of its website an 'information service' and clusters its information into categories on energy efficiency, renewable energy, transport and travel, low impact living, eco-building and renovation and water and sanitation. Blackout Britain (Blackout Britain 2008), weaves its information provision throughout the site, for example in sections labelled 'how' and 'why'. The 'why' section cites energy efficiency, renewable energy and demand reduction as the three key types of action to tackle climate change, and the 'how' section (see figure 2) presents a list of actions that individuals should take in order to contribute to these three aims. The assumption appears to be that once we have found out what the issues are in the 'why' section then we will take action, following advice in the 'how' section. This implicit connection between taking action on the basis of information, and in the process becoming some kind of sustainable consumer and helping bring into being sustainable consumption, is common to the 'getting informed' type of e-advocacy.

[figure 2]

This reliance on information as a key driver of sustainable consumption is linked to the information deficit model of consumer behaviour. This model assumes that individuals are 'rational': that is, that if they are behaving incorrectly (in this case, consuming unsustainably), then this is a result of a deficit of information and can be rectified by providing the missing information, such that individuals as consumers are equipped to make 'rational' decisions in future. If this was the case, then each of us could be transformed into sustainable consumers by virtue of reading the 'right' information.

The information deficit model has been comprehensively criticised in the literature for oversimplifying processes of personal change. Consumption choice is not simply moulded by price and information - instead, individuals confront a number of cognitive, social and structural constraints (Jackson 2006). We are locked into our current, unsustainable consumption patterns by market incentives, psychology and conditioning, social structures and norms, institutional frameworks, working patterns, urban planning and development, cultural values and narratives (Seyfang 2004). We actively make sense of multiple knowledges on the basis of differential relations of trust (Jones 2004), filtering new information through our existing knowledge of structural and cultural settings, public environmental discourse, milieu-specific lifeworlds and environmental mentalities, and the situational, field-specific contexts of everyday life (Brand 1997). To avoid cognitive dissonance we appropriate selected components of the information provided, reducing the surfeit of available information to exclude or reinterpret potentially disturbing knowledge (Giddens 1999). Some have argued that the provision of information may simply serve to enlarge the circle of concern without activating the circle

of influence (Gordon 2002, Hounsham 2006), making us more anxious but not actually supporting us sufficiently to change our behaviour.

If Virtualism is characterised by the presence of virtual consumers that in turn drive a virtual model to which reality is expected to conform, then we can see that the information deficit model shares these two characteristics. Carrier neatly problematises the figure of the rational consumer:

From the foundations of modern Western economic thought, there has been a tendency to construe people in their economic guise as autonomous individuals motivated by internal springs rather than interpersonal relations, to dis-embed them from the social relations and structures within which they exist... neo-classical economics is striking in its methodical fixation on the notion of the autonomous, asocial and apolitical individual who rationally calculates how to achieve his or her best advantage. (Carrier 1998:6)

This rational consumer, which can be considered a kind of economic fiction or virtual consumer, indicates the presence of Virtualism in this type of e-advocacy. The idea that an individual consumes unsustainably as a result of a paucity of information, where making up this information deficit with appropriate information is sufficient to alter their consumption behaviour, centres on the virtual figure of the rational individual. In addition, this information deficit model can be considered an idealised model to which reality is required to conform. If individuals do not become sustainable consumers as a result of engaging with this information it is presumed that they do not sufficiently care or understand; real individuals are required to become 'rational' (motivated (and constrained) solely by the availability of information) in order to become sustainable consumers through this kind of e-advocacy. If Virtualism is characterised by the presence of virtual consumers and a requisite conformity to idealised models of economic behaviour, then 'getting informed' demonstrates Virtualism. Indeed, I argue that this is the most 'Virtualised' end of the spectrum of Virtuality considered in this analysis.

Discussing issues

As explained at the beginning of the previous section, there are two main ways that information is shared on websites – either as one-way or two-way communication. I will focus on the latter in this section, which featured in fifteen of the twenty-five e-advocacy websites in this analysis. This type of e-advocacy encourages individuals to discuss issues and actions as part of the process of their becoming sustainable consumers. Whilst 'discussing issues' – like 'getting informed' – relies upon the communication of information, there is a marked difference in this more participatory form of e-advocacy: the role of 'expert' becomes shared between the website author and website visitors, where visitors can submit their own information to be published and viewed by others on the same website. Individuals participate in sustainable consumption by sharing the role

of advocate through the medium of online discussion, co-constructing what sustainable consumption entails. I will focus on two examples: the Junkk and Mission Sustainability websites.

For Junkk (Junkk 2008), sustainable consumption involves the three R's - reduce, reuse and recycle - where, rather than buying new products to fulfil certain uses, individuals are encouraged to creatively reuse or adapt items that would otherwise be thrown away, to fulfil new functions. Both registered website users and Junkk representatives can equally submit suggestions. In the 'ideas' section of the website, one registered website user submitted an idea to reuse plastic containers by making them into dumbbells (figure 3). This and other suggestions submitted to the site are collated into a searchable database such that website visitors can search 'ideas' by type of item; brand of product that has been reused; type of product that has been reused; and description. Whilst this actively challenges consumerism by promoting innovative reuse rather than disposal and replacement with new products, it also at least in part implicitly legitimises the continued consumption of the throwaway items that are reused, and in a sense advertises particular items by categorising ideas in terms of 'brand' and 'product'. Despite these reservations, Junkk's invitation to individuals to take a creative, active role in sustainable consumption at the micro-scale through individual-level innovation forms a pleasing counter to the policy-level calls for further system-wide innovation in production processes.

[figure 3]

The Mission Sustainability website (Mission Sustainability 2008) - a German-produced effort at international grassroots engagement on sustainable consumption - similarly seeks to build collective knowledge. However, rather than focusing on product reuse as Junkk does, it more broadly seeks to collate "very personal, ...original actions for how to make your everyday life and that of others more sustainable". Visitors to the website are encouraged to register with the site and submit their entries (in either German or English), which are collated on the site and sorted into categories. A competition held in 2007 continued to urge website visitors to submit their ideas for sustainable living, motivating this participation by offering a cash prize where all site visitors could vote for their favourites. Through motivating participation on the basis of the chance to win a cash prize, collaboration is interwoven with accumulation and implicit consumerism. Voting for favourite ideas here appears at face value to be inclusive and support grassroots approaches to sustainable consumption, but could just as easily work to reify one kind of action above others and stand in for other kinds of political action for sustainable consumption.

The two-way communication found on both the Junkk and Mission Sustainability websites is certainly one step closer to Spangenberg's vision of a 'sustainable knowledge society', where "the informal hierarchy of experts and 'ordinary citizens' is replaced by a user-producer-network of knowledge, in which the roles of users and producers are permanently changing: every stakeholder becomes a peer" (2005:91). 'Discussing issues' appears to fulfil the requests in the literature for 'ordinary' people to be present in the advocacy discourse as experts in their own lifeworlds, the absence of which has been flagged as an important reason for the failure of traditional forms of advocacy to generate behaviour change (e.g. Slocum 2004, Hobson 2002). It may also enable visitors to feel greater ownership of and involvement with sustainable consumption, in the process supporting an increased understanding of the kind of sustainability jargon that has been problematised in other reviews as making advocacy confusing to the lay public (e.g. Darnton 2004, 2005; Hounsham 2006, Bloor & Bloor 2007; Burningham & Thrush 2001). But whilst 'discussing issues' is a participatory approach to e-advocacy, it still excludes some people from participating – those unable to read or contribute in English (or for Mission Sustainability, also in German); those who are not sufficiently IT literate to negotiate the process of posting contributions to the websites; and those who feel insufficiently confident about the merit of their ideas to publish them on a public forum. In addition, participation in online discussions almost always requires individuals to register with these websites, lodging names and email addresses at the very least – so those unwilling to give up such personal information would also be excluded from participation.

Aside from these issues, how free might visitors to these websites be to shape the sustainable consumption discourse constructed therein? Viewed from a neo-Foucauldian perspective, we might see that those with authority can decide which kinds of information to include and which to exclude in order to maintain the 'regime of truth' of the discourse and so reify these particular truths as legitimate, excluding the rest as illegitimate (e.g. Mills 2003). Audiences receive these 'legitimate' discourses as the consensus of opinion and therefore as 'truer' than anything outside of them, and it is these discourses that go on to have a key role in the performance of power in the 'green governmentality' (Rutherford 2007) of subjects. Visitors participating in shaping the sustainable consumption discussions on these e-advocacy websites are inevitably at least partially limited by the cultural norms of what is considered possible or achievable, effectively constrained within the bounds of the legitimate meta-discourses of sustainable consumption – as well as the micro-discourses evident on the website. In addition, the website owners still retain the balance of power in these participatory sites, with the ability to moderate and remove posts and to label can categorise posts and discussions, in the process flattening their variety in the pursuit of search efficiency. In

the process, it is quite possible to brand a discussion thread as one thing when it may contain content for another, where sustainable consumption tends to weave together a number of related issues and actions.

How might 'discussing issues' exhibit Virtualism? Inevitably, it inherits some of the problems associated with the information deficit model that I outlined in the previous section. Actively participating individuals here are less virtualised, able to appear in the discourse more or less in their own words, but passive website visitors whose participation involves simply reading the information rather than adding to it, are present only in virtual form as with 'getting informed'. Even though it is more possible for website visitors to shape the sustainable consumption discourse on these e-advocacy sites, they may still be limited in the directions they could take it by a potentially unacknowledged drive to conform to normative models of what sustainable consumption 'should' comprise, so flattening discursive variety. Idealised models of sustainable consumption are here co-constructed by 'ordinary people' as well as third sector advocates, yet they stand as ideal models of behaviour nonetheless.

Sustainability accounting

The third distinct e-advocacy technique identified in this analysis I refer to as 'sustainability accounting'. Here, certain tools enable us to quantify elements of our consumption as a means of judging to what extent we might deviate from the ideal sustainable consumer's levels of consumption, as a technique to responsabilise us to take certain actions. This kind of 'sustainability accounting' was identified in nine of the twenty-five websites in this analysis, and includes pledging and footprinting. Footprinting tools draw the individual's focus to consumption in the past and the present, translating particular actions into numerical values of, for example, CO₂ (for carbon footprints) or global hectares (for ecological footprints). In contrast, pledging sites draw our attention to the future, seeking to get us to commit to carrying out particular actions from now on. I will discuss footprinting and pledging in turn.

Footprinting

Footprinting can be present in one of two ways: either by recommending (and linking to) external footprinting tools, or by incorporating a footprint calculator into the group's own website. Footprinting tools tend to follow a questionnaire format, where users' responses to questions on aspects of their individual consumption of energy, food, etc are translated into a numerical value to represent their 'footprint'. WWF and Sustainable UK utilise this particular kind of e-advocacy (WWF 2008, Sustainable UK 2008). I will focus on WWF's footprinting tool here since it follows the typical footprinting genre, but

unusually combines this with user comment and involvement in debating what should be done to alter personal consumption.

WWF's 'One Planet Future' campaign includes a footprinting tool, and goes so far as to incorporate the footprinting concept into the campaign name: the footprinting tool presents you with a figure of how many 'planets' of resources your current lifestyle consumes, where the ideal, sustainable consumer has a figure of one planet – hence 'one planet living'. The first page of the WWF tool reinforces the idea that footprinting is an important part of the transformation of individuals into sustainable consumers:

Worried about your impact on the environment? The way we use the planet's resources makes up our ecological footprint. Measuring yours takes less than 5 minutes and could set you on a life-changing journey.

Users do not need to log in to use the tool, but are encouraged to register with the site in order to store their results and so become part of the WWF footprinting online community. After answering several pages of questions on different aspects of personal consumption, visitors are presented with three different figures for three different footprints: in figure 4, which represents my personal footprint, this tool tells me I have a 'footprint' of 2.73 planets, an 'ecological footprint' of 4.92 hectares, and a 'carbon footprint' of 10.84 tonnes per annum. The answers provided in each section of the footprint questionnaire are used to generate a series of tailored 'eco-tips', which users are invited to respond to in one of three ways: 'will do', 'have done' or 'not for me'. Selecting 'have done' generates a new tip.

[figure 4]

Even to those with some understanding of the difference between a 'footprint', 'ecological footprint' and a 'carbon footprint', these three results presented side-by-side are quite confusing and are not directly meaningful in everyday, easily comprehensible terms. The WWF footprinting tool conflates consumption for work and for personal use in some categories while keeps them separate in others, which adds to the sense of confusion. It is unusual in that it offers tailored tips and advice as to what you should do to reduce your footprint – other footprinting tools tend to simply present you with a figure, and as a result, the sense that something is wrong. The precise, numerical value of a footprint calculated using one of these tools conceals the various debates over what should and shouldn't be measured, how it should be measured and even if it is measurable. The lack of a uniform approach to footprinting (Weidman & Minx 2007), despite the UK government's encouragement that initiatives should utilise their 'Act on CO₂' calculator as a means of standardisation, inevitably leads to some degree of variability in footprint size, even when the same questions are asked and the same

answers provided to different footprinting tools. Indeed, the premise of footprinting is that it is possible to objectively know and quantify what makes our consumption unsustainable, across various parameters including the amount of carbon (or CO₂) associated with certain activities, as well as water and other resource use. By including only certain activities, and within these activities including only limited aspects of their resource use (why do we refer to 'carbon' only in terms of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and not methane (CH₄), another greenhouse gas, for example?), they inevitably reify certain consumption actions and certain aspects of those, so excluding others. In addition, there are issues around how precisely we can know the resource use of different consumption activities (where footprinting tools frequently display resource use to two decimal places). Inevitably, to make the tools practicable and functional it is not possible to include the sheer scale of variety of different products with different efficiencies with different product lifecycles. Tools attempting to find an average for, say, 'boiling only as much water as you need' tend not to take into account how much water this involves, what kind of kettle you use and how efficient it is, or the kettle's lifecycle which could have some bearing on the sustainability of your consumption (whether the kettle was bought brand-new or second-hand, for example). In a sense, products and consumption actions become virtualised through their disembedding and abstraction from context in this way. Individuals as consumers are encouraged to conform to this abstract model – which appears to be constructed from an imagined array of average people using average products, undertaking average activities in an average way and under average conditions – and to emulate the figure of the perfect (average) virtual consumer that consumes only one planet equivalent's worth of resources.

Pledging

In contrast to the focus on past and present action seen in footprinting, pledging is essentially a system of getting users to commit to undertake action in the future. It is a technique employed by the Earthly Sins site, the Energy Saving Trust, Generous, We Are What We Do and The Nag (Earthly Sins 2008, Energy Saving Trust 2007, Generous 2008, We Are What We Do 2008, The Nag 2008). Like with 'discussing issues', pledging websites tend to require individuals to register with the site before selecting certain actions to pledge to carry out (sometimes with the option to comment on these actions), where pledges are recorded on registered individuals' profiles within the website. Those electing not to register are generally not permitted to participate, though there is of course nothing preventing them from personally choosing to make the pledge and carry out the action in question without recording this online.

The Energy Saving Trust adopted a particularly interesting pledging approach during their 2007 energy efficiency campaign (figure 5). By the end of the campaign, which ran throughout 2007, website visitors had made a total of 216,997 pledges. Individuals were encouraged to “commit to save your 20%” – that is, 20% of the CO₂ emissions resulting from energy use in their home – by linking pledges made via the website to a favourite place in the UK selected by the website visitor. The opening webpage makes the link between climate change and physical places that matter to people, constructing these places – wherever or whatever they may be – as being at risk from the effects of climate change. The inference is that by selecting from a short list of simple, possible actions (including only boiling as much water as you need, and turning off lights when leaving a room), these places can in fact be ‘saved’ from the effects of climate change. Having thus pledged to carry out a selection of these actions, users were then presented with a precise-looking numerical value for the amount of CO₂ that they would ‘save’ by doing so, similar in this way to footprinting. The final act in this pledge involved the selection of a photo of a favourite place from an online database, to create a virtual postcard that would then be sent on to friends and family detailing the pledge and inviting participation. This virtual postcard was also added to the gallery on the website, such that other web visitors could view it. Through utilising this innovative postcard idea to link individual actions for reduced energy consumption to physical places, this e-advocacy effectively held pledgers’ favourite places to ransom. These places can only be ‘saved’ from climate change if participating pledgers promise to undertake abstracted, generic actions in the home. It is pertinent to note that these actions were all within the sphere of everyday energy consumption, and that they failed to fundamentally challenge political or social structures, a wider point I come back to in the conclusion.

[figure 5]

In many pledging websites, registered members’ profiles reveal the pledges that they have made. Conceivably there may be a degree of kudos associated with making certain pledges, or making a certain number of pledges, such that conspicuous pledging may encourage a kind of conspicuous sustainable consumption that could be entirely unrelated to actions that individuals may actually undertake. Another potential downside of pledges is their reliance on deferred action, which suffers from the problems of hyperbolic discounting such that individuals are required to weigh up whether it is worth acting now for benefits that may or may not emerge in the future.

Taking footprinting and pledging together, the phenomenon of ‘sustainability accounting’ supports surveillance of our switch to sustainable consumption at different levels: at the

individual level; at the level of the advocacy organisation; and (for sites utilising government tools like the Act on CO₂ footprint calculator, or receiving funding from the government) at the level of national Government. For instance, pledging sites tend to record the number of pledges made (generally allocating these to particular categories) as a measure of the number of sustainable consumers produced as a result of interacting with this e-advocacy. This is useful in some ways: individual actions accumulated at different levels enable users to feel part of something and they may well add up to a significant change on aggregate. 'Sustainability accounting' in both its forms may be seductively simpler to measure compared to the full spectrum of what may be considered to be sustainable consumption actions that are actually undertaken, where - rather than the individual purchases identified by Clarke et al (2007) as 'ethical consumption singularities' - it is these pledges or footprints that are considered important as symbolic, measurable gestures.

How do pledging and footprinting demonstrate Virtualism? Both of these e-advocacy tools reify certain actions within the sustainable consumption discourse as part of a programme of constructing idealised and so limited models of sustainable consumption. Where pledging seems to employ a binary relationship with conformity to the virtual sustainable consumer - if you pledge to carry out a certain action then you will become a sustainable consumer, but if you don't, you won't - footprinting shows you how close you already are to becoming the ideal virtual consumer on an incremental scale, such that (as in my case, as shown in figure 4) it is possible to 'know' that you are consuming 1.73 planets-worth more than the ideal, virtual sustainable consumer as predicted by the footprinting model. Individuals are encouraged to transform into idealised virtual sustainable consumers, defined either as imagined individuals who undertake each of the pledges and/or have an ideal 'footprint'.

Sustainable consumerism

The fourth type of e-advocacy is the incitement to make 'green' or 'ethical' purchases, and was present in all but four of the twenty-five websites analysed here, making it the second most commonly mobilised type of e-advocacy. Green and ethical products are increasingly promoted in tandem (for instance it is now possible to purchase items that are both organic *and* fairly-traded), and so I refer to them here as 'sustainable consumerism' since they both assume that sustainable consumption is achievable through the purchase of certain products. This kind of e-advocacy may either involve recommendations to purchase specific products, or the combination of such a recommendation with a link to an online shop (which may be external to the website or

integrated within it) to enable you to purchase the promoted product immediately. I will introduce two contrasting examples.

The Low Impact Living Initiative (LILI 2008) website combines promoting sustainable consumerism with DIY and skills building in its construction of sustainable consumption. For example, rather than simply encouraging people to buy solar water heating systems as a means of reducing their domestic carbon footprint, LILI provides information, training and access to materials to enable individuals to make their own solar water heating system. Website visitors can browse LILI's online shop (categories include shelter, energy, transport and people (including bodycare and funeral arrangements amongst other things)), which contains links to several external websites. This selection of external retailers is justified as follows:

We're linking up with small manufacturers to bring you high-quality, value-for-money products. Buy from us and we'll help others reduce their environmental impact too.

The implication is that by using LILI's shop to purchase a limited array of pre-selected products, website visitors can use their individual acts of sustainable consumption to help make production more sustainable as well a consumption.

The Tap e-advocacy site (Tap 2008), in contrast, uses consumerism to promote its campaign message. Tap problematises the consumption of bottled water, inviting website visitors to "think globally, drink locally" by drinking tap water rather than buying bottled water. In a section entitled 'buy tap' (figure 6) visitors are invited to support the campaign by purchasing specially branded water bottles, profits from the sales of which go to support water projects in developing countries. As well as bottles, you can purchase 'bottled water labelling kits' to adorn empty drinks bottles that you have already bought with the Tap campaign branding. These labels include:

...our patented Drink-O-Meter [so] you can keep track of your re-fills. Mark off each time you fill up and when you reach ten, recycle. Guaranteed savings for you and the planet.

Where prior to engaging with the Tap campaign website visitors might have already reused water bottles indefinitely, on engagement with this e-advocacy they are newly encouraged not only to use extra resources in order to print off a special campaign label and affix it to their used water bottle, but also to dispose of both this label and the bottle after just ten uses.

[figure 6]

Sustainable consumerism allows us to believe that we can achieve sustainability through guided mass consumption and subtly engineered purchasing preferences (Luke 1997). There are positives associated with this type of e-advocacy: interacting with 'sustainable'

goods may alter the ways that we behave, such that they can take on the role of ‘moralising machines’ to instil in us a kind of ‘techno ethics’ (Shove 2006, Hobson 2006); and products may have been produced in such a way as to bring about environmental and social benefits in comparison with traditional modes of production. Yet there are also negatives – as Curtis (2003) argues, ‘better’ or ‘less bad’ is not automatically equivalent to ‘good’. Sustainable consumerism works on the premise that it is possible to decouple consumption from unsustainability, whilst simultaneously supporting market systems and continually feeding an only subtly altered economy. Whilst resource use might well be minimised at the product level, on aggregate when total consumption is considered, levels of resource use will still increase as long as we are encouraged to buy more things. By promoting sustainable consumerism as sustainable consumption advocates lend it legitimacy, effectively commodifying resistance to consumption (Bryant & Goodman 2004) by tying action firmly to the neoliberal forms of production and consumption responsible for driving unsustainable consumption (e.g. Rutherford 2007). This association draws “social and political campaigns and movements into the orbit of advertising and the commodified language of the market” (Chouliarki & Fairclough 1999:12), reinforcing a ‘politics of no alternative’ where consumerism becomes constructed as a force for social change (Guthman 2004, 2007). Shopping your way to sustainability online also tends to require individuals to have a bank account; building social capital through mobilising financial capital excludes those without such an account, and adds to the physical distancing of individuals as consumers from those selling or producing the ‘sustainable’ products. Individuals are effectively urged to “forsake a long march toward the institutions in favour of a long shopping trip through the malls to revolutionise society” (Luke 1997:119).

The model of ‘sustainable consumerism’ takes market based consumption as a given, instead problematising material inefficiencies and pollution in production and disposal along with unfair or unethical trading systems. The consumer here is a relatively passive agent, afforded responsibility for driving sustainable consumption by purchasing selected reified products that producers and marketers have ultimately pre-selected, standing in for real consumers in their role as sovereign virtual consumers. Real consumers – us, when we go shopping – make only a limited contribution to this demand, as Hughes (2004) has argued in the context of purchasing ethically traded cut flowers (as discussed earlier). Real consumers are only present in the model of sustainable consumerism by the traces they leave in their purchase histories, described as ‘ethical consumption singularities’ by Clarke et al (2007). The model of sustainable consumerism reifies the role of the market in our daily lives, such that non-market based consumption – which could encompass making (rather than buying) things, repairing rather than replacing items, consumption of second-hand goods, non-monetary exchange and even

the purposeful non-consumption of commodities – tends to be left out and so marginalised. Focusing on sustainable consumerism seems to leave shrinking room for groups who consume little or less (Castells 2000), who – if sustainable consumption was not measured in terms of Clarke et al's consumption singularities – might otherwise be considered 'real' sustainable consumers.

Political action

The fifth and final type of e-advocacy identified in this analysis is 'political action', utilised to varying degrees by Blackout Britain, the Campaign for Better Transport, Friends of the Earth, Tourism Concern and WWF (Blackout Britain 2008, Campaign for Better Transport 2008, FoE 2008, Tourism Concern 2008, WWF 2008). There are two main approaches to 'political action': what I term 'guided political action' (adopted by WWF and FoE) and a more freeform approach that points website visitors to means of undertaking political action without providing much in the way of guidance. I will discuss each in turn.

Guided political action – a form of sustainable consumption e-advocacy utilised by Tourism Concern, WWF and Friends of the Earth – requires individuals to register with the website in order to receive information on campaigns and use tools to enable them to participate in online political action. Each of these sites provides complementary tools – for example including downloadable letters (Tourism Concern), template emails (Friends of the Earth) and guidance on effective campaigning (WWF) – in addition to regular emails with information on new campaigns and the requisite actions to take. Friends of the Earth send out 'campaign pack' emails twice a year, while WWF send more regular email updates. These political actions may involve making a phone call, sending an email, signing an online petition or writing a letter. The websites generally provide templates for these actions, such that the registered website visitor only needs to add their name before clicking 'send'. WWF uses data on this kind of activity as evidence of support for particular issues in representations to political leaders:

Thanks to our online campaigners, we can highlight important issues to MPs and other political leaders.

Read about recent successes our campaigners have helped us to achieve.

In 'political action', individuals are urged to undertake certain reified actions by participating in tailor-made campaigns, in order to drive political change and in turn bring into being a particular model of sustainable consumption. Individuals are more or less abstracted from the process, required only to respond to a monthly email by adding their name to a different template email that will be forwarded to the relevant party being campaigned against. As with pledging, the ideal sustainable consumer is expected to undertake the suite of online political actions advocated.

Not all e-advocacy websites utilise guided political action. For example, the Campaign for Better Transport and Blackout Britain approaches to 'political action' e-advocacy seem to allow individuals to choose which issues are important to them and to allow individuals to pursue whichever means of campaigning they feel most drawn to. Blackout Britain advocates protests within its suite of recommendations, though predominantly by linking to protests and campaigns organised by other organisations (for instance, recommending participation at Climate Camp or The Big Ask day of action). Perhaps unsurprisingly given its name, the Campaign for Better Transport focuses its advocacy for political action on taking part in local campaigning, either starting your own campaign or linking individuals to existing campaigns through an online database of these groups. It also produces an online guide for campaigners offering step-by-step advice.

In contrast to the majority of the e-advocacy considered in this analysis, 'political action' re-situates action for sustainable consumption from the individual focus to wider socio-political systems. This may be an effective way to bring sustainable consumption into being. The individualisation of responsibility found in the majority of e-advocacy flattens power relations, inferring that everyone is equally responsible for unsustainable consumption choices (whereas profligate consumers are arguably more responsible than more moderate consumers), and distracting individuals from collective action (e.g. Barnett et al 2005, Luke 1997). It also abstracts the individual consumer from broader systems of provision that are involved in a dialectical relationship with consumption, which political action would seem to address. If "sustainability is a problem of economic design, not individual morality" (Robins & Roberts 2006:45) then change may more easily be facilitated by adjusting systems of provision, realigning societal values, and instigating a range of regulatory, budgetary and fiscal measures that would support the 'one-planet lifestyles' to which we are encouraged to aspire (Bond 2005). Guided political action is the more Virtualised of the two forms of this type of e-advocacy since individuals are almost entirely abstracted from participating in political action, where the advocates stand as the virtual consumer, selecting which issues to campaign on, who to target and how to take political action. Despite this, political action is possibly the least Virtualised of all the forms of e-advocacy considered in this analysis.

Concluding remarks

In this paper I have argued that sustainable consumption e-advocacy is prone to Virtualism, but of a peculiarly virtual kind. This 'virtual Virtualism' challenges naïve conceptualisations of the Internet as an emancipatory space whereby individuals can

participate freely (cf. Miller 2000). In addition, I have questioned the ability of sustainable consumption e-advocacy to tackle unsustainable patterns of consumption. In short, I propose that neither the Internet nor typical forms of sustainable consumption e-advocacy are able to bring into being the 'negation of the negation of the negation' of the alienation and abstraction associated with capitalist systems of organisation. I have proposed a typology of the five main types of sustainable consumption e-advocacy produced by third sector groups and organisations and aimed at transforming the UK public into sustainable consumers. I argued that each of these types of e-advocacy – getting informed, discussing issues, sustainability accounting, sustainable consumerism and political action – demonstrates some traces of Virtualism relating to their constructions of sustainable consumers and models of sustainable consumption. In some respects this might be considered as being a spectrum of Virtuality, where getting informed is the most abstract and abstracting form of action for sustainable consumption and political action is the least abstracted. 'Getting informed' assumes that individuals are rational and that information will lead to sustainable consumption. Whilst 'discussing issues' shares some of these problems, it does at least allow individuals to co-construct what sustainable consumption involves, and so is less abstracted from real consumers and their real kinds of sustainable consumption. 'Sustainability accounting' – consisting of pledging and footprinting – incorporates some of the participatory elements found with 'discussing issues', but also has the potential to substitute actions in the physical world for online accounting, reducing action to the realm of the virtual. 'Sustainable consumerism', unlike the other three forms so far discussed, focuses on actual consumption acts, but still speaks to a model that sees subtly altered market-based purchasing as the solution to the problem of sustainable consumption, failing to tackle systems of organisation and the culture of accumulation that shapes processes of increasing production and consumption. 'Political action', possibly the least Virtual e-action in this spectrum of Virtualisation, potentially addresses these larger issues where the focus is on the system rather than individual purchases. Yet even here, individuals are guided in their participation in campaigns to the extent that action is frequently reduced to the isolated action of adding your name to an online petition or template email, rather than fully engaging with issues through personal exploration, creative political expression and interaction with like-minded others.

What does the proliferation of e-advocacy mean for more sustainable consumption, the development of political spaces around the environment and consumption, and for shifting away from the structures of unsustainability? Whilst it may be an imperfect and rather passive means of engaging individuals, this e-advocacy has the merit of being able to reach those who are seeking information on how to make sustainable consumption decisions and can set up a more participatory interaction such

that website visitors can share the role of advocate and expert with the creators of these websites. As part of a spectrum of advocacy activity that embraces both material and discursive strategies, e-advocacy could – despite these shortcomings – play an important role in supporting individuals in stepping closer to the spectral figure of the ideal sustainable consumer. Yet there is a very real danger that, as e-advocacy in its present form continues to grow into *the* way that third-sector organisations engage audiences and that the public comes to understand sustainable consumption, wider structural and political engagement by these same members of the public will rapidly recede into the background in favour of individualised pledges and acts of green consumption. Thus political engagement and indeed sustainable consumption more generally might rapidly morph into a de-materialised and tepid spectral kind of politics, focused more inwardly upon our selves and diffused across our individualised virtual spaces, rather than building into a more substantive clamouring for material, structural and policy changes with respect to the environment. How the virtual spaces of e-advocacy begin to confront this charge remains to be seen.

Notes

1. I have chosen to focus on third sector organisations rather than non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The UK's National Audit Office defines third sector organisations as not-for-profit, not directly controlled by the state nor part of the public sector, pursuant of social and environmental objectives, reinvesting profits in pursuit of their objectives rather than distributing them to shareholders, and taking a number of organisational forms. The main difference between the third sector organisations and NGOs is that the latter are legally constituted, whilst third sector organisations may be either formally or informally constituted. My focus on the third sector rather than NGOs allows us to simultaneously consider informal grassroots activity alongside that being carried out by formal, legally constituted organisations. (NAO 2008)
2. While internet access in the UK is widespread increasing, there are differences in access (National Statistics 2006): men were found to be more likely to have accessed the internet than women, young people use the internet significantly more than older people, higher earners access the internet more than lower earners, and there are also regional differences. Those who don't access the internet cite a lack of skills, a lack of expensive equipment or access to telecommunications, or physical disability as among the reasons.

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Figures

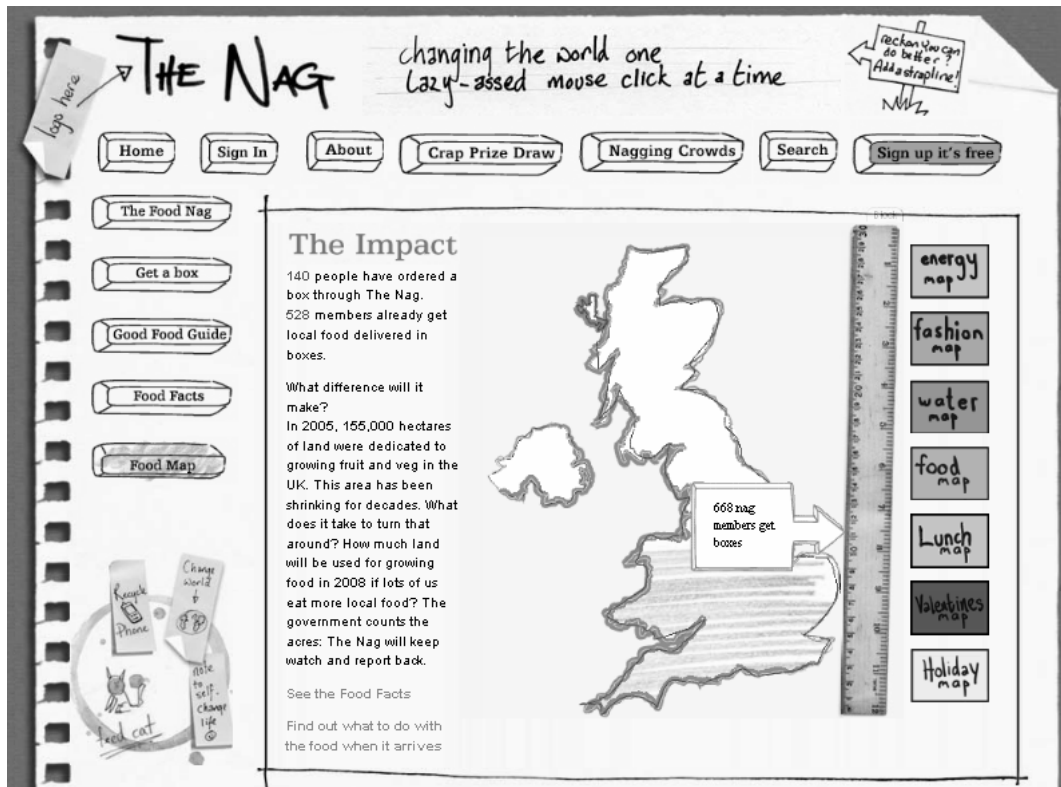


Figure 1: The Nag, a pledging website that seeks to get visitors to commit to certain sustainable consumption actions each month, displays the number of times that visitors have pledged to undertake these actions. www.thenag.net, accessed 09/09/2008

<i>Sustainable consumption e-advocacy websites</i>	<i>Types of e-action advocated</i>				
	Getting informed	Discussing issues	Sustainability accounting	Sustainable consumerism	Political action
Blackout Britain, www.blackoutbritain.org.uk	✓			✓	✓
Campaign for Better Transport, www.bettertransport.org.uk	✓	✓		✓	✓
Centre for Alternative Technology, www.cat.org.uk/information/	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cynnal Cymru, www.sustainwales.com	✓		✓	✓	
Earthly Sins Temple of Enlightenment, www.earthlysins.org	✓		✓	✓	
East Anglia Food Link, www.eafl.org.uk	✓				
Energy Saving Trust, www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/commit	✓		✓	✓	
Ethical Consumer Guide, www.ethicalconsumer.org	✓	✓		✓	
Food Up Front, www.foodupfront.org	✓				
Friends of the Earth, www.foe.co.uk/living/index.html	✓	✓		✓	✓
Generous, http://generous.org.uk	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Global Action Plan, www.globalactionplan.org.uk/green.aspx	✓			✓	
Grown Up Green, www.grownupgreen.org.uk	✓	✓		✓	
International Downshifting Week, www.downshiftingweek.com	✓	✓			
Junkk, www.junkk.com	✓	✓		✓	
Low Impact Living Initiative, www.lowimpact.org	✓	✓		✓	
Mission Sustainability, www.mission-sustainability.org	✓	✓		✓	
RSPB, www.rspb.org.uk/advice/green	✓			✓	
Smart Planet, www.smartplanet.com	✓	✓		✓	
Sustainable UK, www.sus-uk.com/individuals	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Tap, www.wewanttap.com	✓			✓	
The Nag, www.thenag.net	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Tourism Concern, www.tourismconcern.org.uk/index.php?page=for-tourists	✓			✓	✓
We Are What We Do, www.wearewhatwedo.org	✓	✓	✓	✓	
WWF, http://www.wwf.org.uk/oneplanet/ophome.asp	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 1: Third sector sustainable consumption e-advocacy websites and the types of action that they call for. These websites inform the analysis presented in this paper.

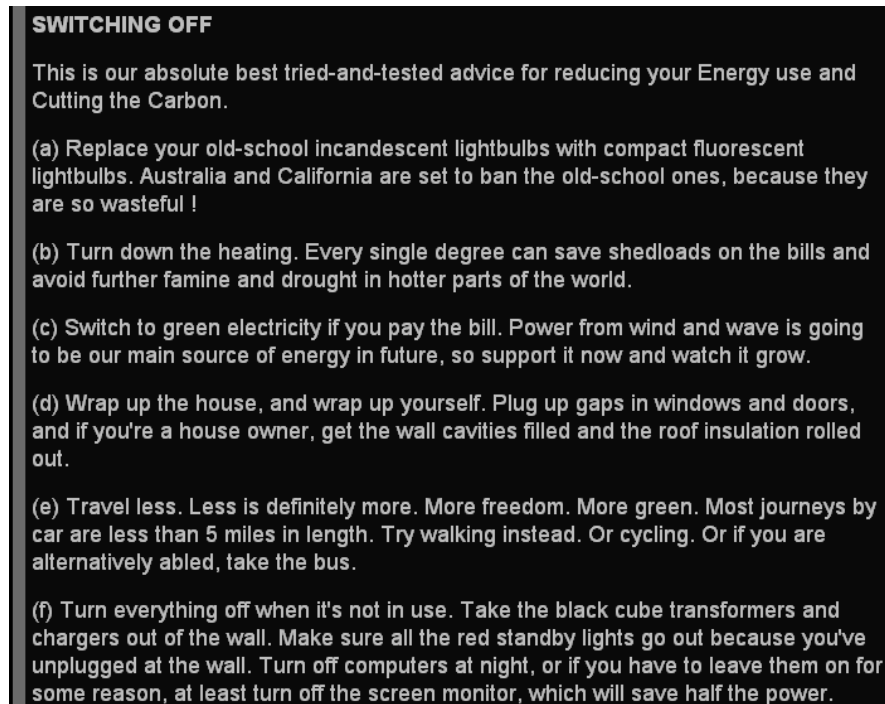


Figure 2: In the 'how' section of its advocacy website, Blackout Britain sets out lists of personal actions that website visitors can take in order to become sustainable consumers and help to deliver sustainable (energy) consumption, as a means of tackling climate change.

The screenshot shows the Junkk.com website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, About, Community, Ideas, Answers, Local, and Articles. There are also search boxes for Keywords and Site Search. The main content area features a post titled "DUMBBELLS" by user Emma. The post includes a photograph of two dumbbells made from chocolate containers. The user details and post information are as follows:

User:	Emma(Ask User)
Rating:	Be the first to rate!
Brand:	Malteasers
Product:	Chocolate Hot Drink container
Description:	container
Material:	PETE (#1)
Useage:	Household
Colour:	Black
Dimensions:	10.3 x na x na (HxWxD cm)
Int ø Dia:	10.5 cm
Ext ø Dia:	10.6 cm
Date:	06/09/2005

Instructions:
Fill two of these with sand or rice, glue a piece of spare pipe in between them and it makes a dumbbell. Alternatively, fill them up with rice/pasta/cereal and display them in your kitchen.

On the right side of the post, there are three circular buttons: "CLICK 4 GREEN GOLD", "BLOG", and "RE:ite by Junkk.com". The date "15/08/2008" is displayed in the top right corner of the post area. On the left side, there is a "MY JUNKK" login section with fields for Username and Password, and buttons for Login, Lost Password?, and Register Now.

Figure 3: Website visitors creatively reuse items that they would normally have discarded on the Junkk website

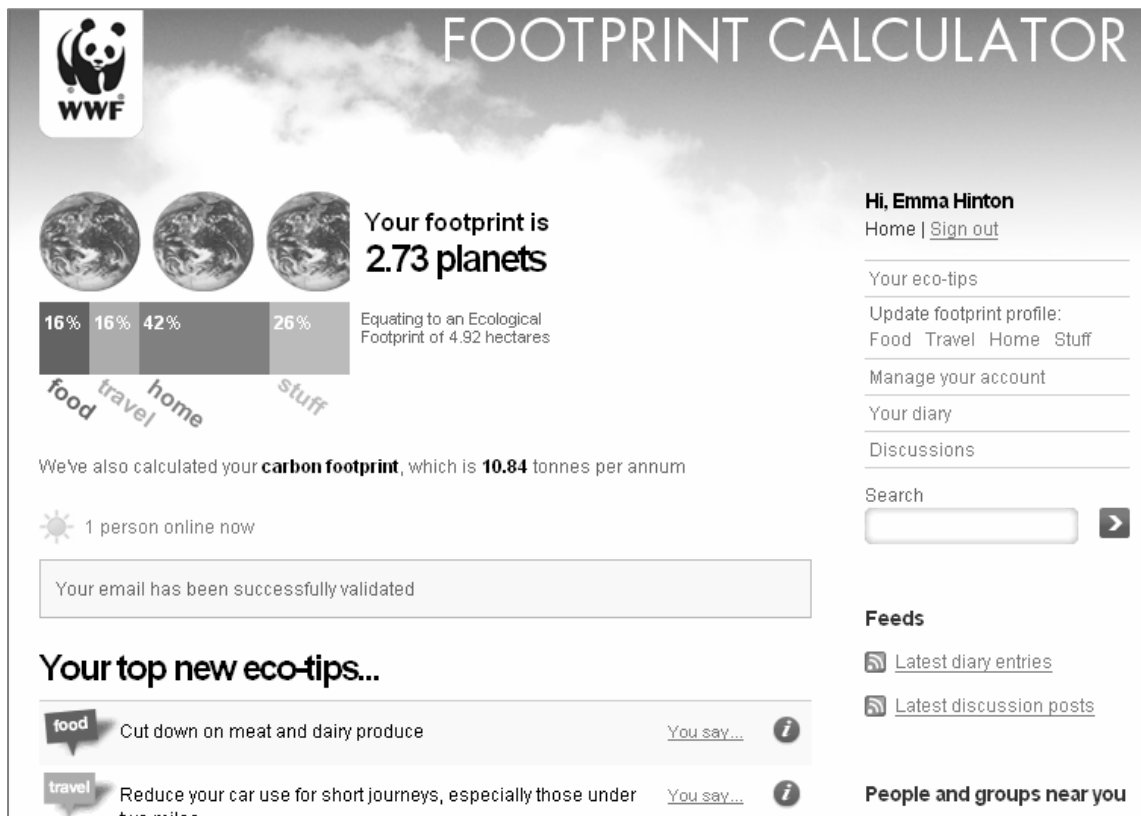


Figure 4: The WWF footprint calculator. Users answer a series of questions grouped into 'food', 'travel', 'home' and 'stuff' (which unusually includes pets), and answers are fed into a calculating program embedded into the website to produce a value for an associated ecological and carbon footprint.

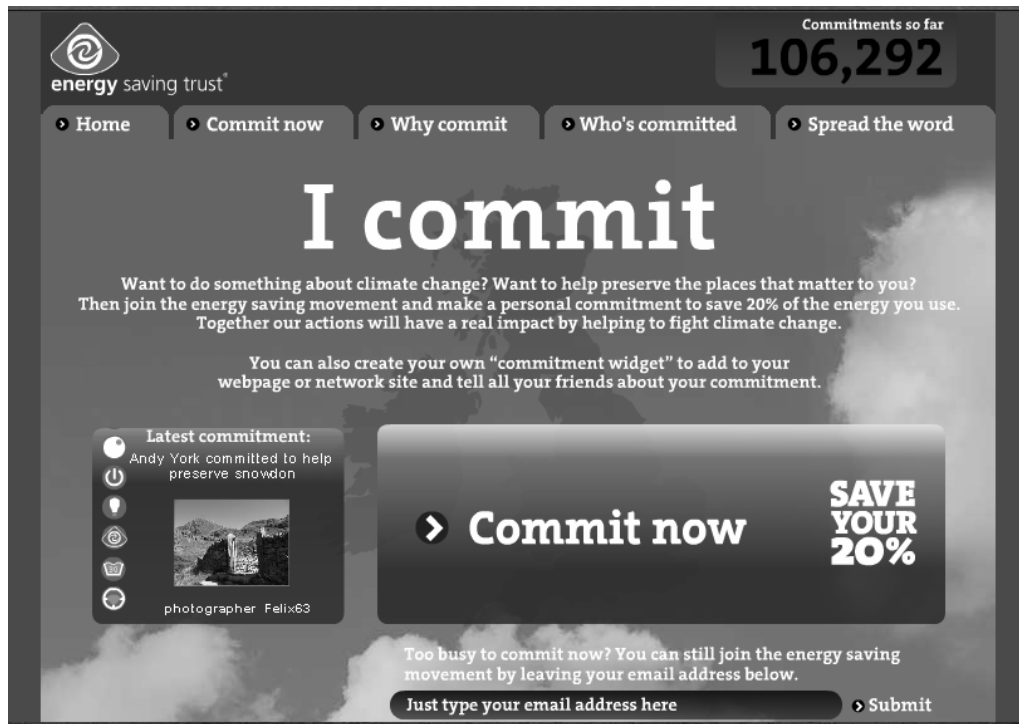


Figure 5. The homepage of the Energy Saving Trust 2007 campaign, 'Save your 20%', www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/commit/ (accessed 18/06/2007). This pledging website links pledges for saving energy in the home with saving physical places from the effects of climate change.

Providing bottled water for British consumers produces an estimated 33,200 tonnes of CO₂ emissions per Block

Tap

WE ARE TAP BAD WATER BUY TAP TAP ACTION RESOURCES TAPPED MEDIA CONTACT

Get in touch for the inside scoop Sign Up

For a happy you and a healthy planet

TAKE THE TAP CHALLENGE
» HERE «

Buy me



400ml re-usable Tap water bottle.

Our fun, festive executive-size bottle is just the ticket for an on-the-go lifestyle. Fits in your bag or on your desk. High quality, aerodynamic, and irresistible.

£6 Add to basket

- Is Carbon Neutral
- Supports water charities
- Saves you Money
- Cuts Carbon
- Reduces Landfill

Figure 6: the Tap campaign website, www.wewanttap.com (accessed 11/09/2008), challenges the consumption of bottled water by selling consumers refillable bottles.