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In Search of Utopia: An Analysis of Non-profit Webpages

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Abstract

This research explores the practical application of a widely held, utopian belief that the Internet remains a strong democratizing tool because of its inherent interactive capabilities. Through an analysis of 70 non-profit web pages, this study examines how these organizations utilize the Internet as a deliberative public sphere; an opportunity for activism; an avenue for advertising and fundraising revenue; a space for marginalized voices; an interconnected, instantaneous portal for information; and as a medium to bolster organizational accountability. This represents fundamental baseline research that is needed if the field is to build theories of Internet efficacy – particularly as it pertains to the non-profit sector.

Keywords

Non-profit organization, democracy, web pages, Internet functionality

Long before McLuhan observed that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964: 2), technological visionaries were expounding upon the "positive powers of transformation" (Kelemen and Smith, 2001: 370) embedded in each new media technology. Yet, none, prior to the Internet, had seen the massive social implications that were first dreamed (Rucinski, 1991). However, the Internet showed early signs of promise in reversing this trend. Cyberlibertarians were quick to advocate the power of the technology and the power of the individual in creating a liberated democratic sphere (Kelemen and Smith, 2001) that did not rely on traditional space (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). This so-called 'virtual community' (Rheingold, 1994) would fundamentally shift democratic participation (Bertelson, 1992) and public discourse (Slevin, 2000, Kellner, 1999) . Recent events appeared to support the notion of online civic engagement – the online organizing successes of the 2000 World Trade Organization protesters in Seattle and the 2004 Howard Dean campaign for the Democratic Presidential nominee are just two current examples. Even those who questioned such utopian notions agreed that the Internet is "qualitatively the most radical and sweeping of these new communication technologies" (McChesney, 2000: 5).

Yet, with all of the technological promise of the Internet, dramatic shifts in democracy and social change did not follow. Over a decade after the World Wide Web exploded onto the technological landscape, voting – the principal civic act – has dropped to only 54.7 percent of the voting age population (2004). There has been reduced involvement with civic organizations (Kranich, 2000); many citizens simply do not actively seek out political information online (Sparks, 2001, Davis, 1999), and there remain no citizen initiatives at the national level (Becker, 2001). Indeed, the advent of new democratic processes because of the Internet has not been made clear (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001, Diani, 2000).

Some scholarly investigation suggests that the Internet remains a strong democratizing tool because of its inherent interactive capabilities (i.e. Dahlberg, 2001, Bolter, 1991, Coombs, 1998, Flower, 1984, Mitra, 1997, Kapor, 1994). Outside of this research, there are three major camps critically examining the Internet's populist capabilities: those centered on questions of general access (Katzman, 1974, Lengel, 1998, 1999, Dutta-Bergman, 2005, Selwyn, 2004, Mehra et al., 2004); others interested in content corporatization and commercialization (Dahlberg, 2000, Habermas, 1989, Jensen, 1997, McChesney, 2000, Samoriski, 2000); and a third group of researchers examining universal usage patterns (LaRose et al., 2003, Kelly and Lewis, 2001, Leonhirth et al., 1997, Streck,

1998). Thus, the majority of critical research exploring the potential egalitarian promise of the Internet has centered on general communicative issues outside the realm of non-profit organizations.

The continuously growing use of the Internet has led some researchers (Kiousis, 2001, Fogg et al., 2002) and practitioners (Tucher, 1997, France, 1999) to question the quality and credibility of online content. Other research has urged caution in celebrating the benefits of the Internet (i.e.Kellner, 1995, McChesney, 2000, Carey, 1992), but none have done any systematic examination of actual web content. This research aims to examine the content of 70 non-profit organizations' websites in the hopes of building a better understanding of what non-profits are actually doing on the web and how present online functionality measures up to previous projections of an utopian online commons. This represents fundamental baseline research that is needed if the field is to build theories of Internet efficacy – particularly as it pertains to non-profit organizations. That being said, this examination of Internet efficacy could be applied to other online groups, persons, companies or organizations.

Examining Non-profit Organizations

The overwhelming majority of non-profit organizations are small, community-based groups that rely heavily on volunteers. While initially slow to adopt new technologies in the past (Jamieson, 2000), non-profit organizations have increasingly adopted new technological modes of action (2001b). It was difficult to even find non-profits online before 1999 (Boeder, 2002), but they have been turning to the Internet at a faster rate – particularly larger non-profits (2001b). In 2001, almost 85 percent of non-profits sampled reported engaging with new technologies (Burt and Taylor, 2001).

Non-profit organizations are the basis for this study because of their general adherence to egalitarian, communal and democratic principles (Spencer, 2002). Undoubtedly, all non-profits do not follow these utopian guidelines. However, it is suggested that these ideal organizational qualities of non-profits would be more likely to translate to equitable online functionality than the organizational qualities of their commercial counterparts. And while some individual users may adhere to similar principles, their fiscal and time considerations may preclude them from utilizing the Internet to its fullest capacity. Non-profits do not have an abundance of time or money, but one would assume that they have more incentive than individual Internet users to pursue greater Internet functionality. It should be noted, however, that because non-profits do not have excessive financial capital, many of

the strategies they may wish to pursue might not be possible. Thus, this research would be improved with an ancillary study that interviews individuals responsible for the content examined in this research. These individuals could be asked about their motivations, limitations and any mitigating factors that may have existed when they created their online content. In doing so, research could have a better grasp of the limitations on creating and executing online material as well as the original purpose of the resulting content.

It is also important to note that not all non-profit organizations have an emphasis on civic engagement. For many such organizations, political involvement is not germane to their mission. Indeed, may organizations explicitly remove themselves from political decision making to protect their tax-exempt status. That being said, non-profit citizen organizations spent between 55 and 70 million dollars on political advocacy campaigns, constituting roughly one-seventh of the 400 million dollars expended on political advertising during the 1996 elections by parties, candidates, and others (1996). The American Association of Fundraising Counsel reported that charitable giving reached an all-time high of $240.92 billon in 2002, which equates to 2.3 percent of America's gross domestic product (2003). The Independent Sector estimates volunteerism with non-profit organizations at 83.9 million American adults, or 44 percent of the adult population (2001a). The power and reach of non-profits led President Clinton to write "in many cases it is nonprofit organizations that convert philanthropy into results -- helping people in need, providing health care and educating our Nation's youth. The nonprofit sector is an integral component of our national life" (Clinton, 1999: 1).

It has been argued that non-profits could improve their public education, fundraising, volunteer recruitment, publicity, advocacy, service delivery, research and communication through an effective Internet presence (Landesmann, 1995, Spencer, 2002). National non-profits could communicate with greater ease to their local branches (Barndt, 1998). With the advent of the Internet, non-profits could reshape their internal organization and redefine their business scope (Burt and Taylor, 2001). Third sector organizations could also expand training, media relations, community building, knowledge sharing and opinion sampling (Spencer, 2002). Governmental organizations and businesses with a commercial interest certainly have many of these shared concerns. Yet, non-profit organizations, with their particular emphasis on advocacy, volunteerism, fundraising, and relationship building (Johnson, 1999), appear to have a unique opportunity to utilize the Internet as a Habermasian public sphere in the way that many early scholars predicted.

For this research, 70 websites were randomly selected from Guidestar, an online national database of non-profit organizations. Guidestar itself is a 501(c)(3) organization managed by Philanthropic Research, Inc. It holds a searchable database of more than 1.5 million IRS-recognized non-profit organizations (2005b). These are organizations that have officially filed for 'non-profit' status with the Internal Revenue Service, the U.S. government agency responsible for tax collection and tax law enforcement. A completely open-ended search was conducted on the Guidestar website (i.e. no keyword, name, city, state or category). From this, Guidestar listed the first 500 organizations found. Every 7th non-profit organization (500 organizations listed/70 total needed) was included in the analysis. This resulted in 70 non-profit organizations. It should be noted that all 70 non-profit organizations were based in the United States and this research was based in the U.S. as well.

Two graduate students were employed as coders and were instructed to analyze all content within three degrees of separation from the home page. A degree of separation is defined as the number of 'clicks' necessary to go from one WWW page to another" (Mitra and Cohen, 1999). Given the exponentiality of hypertext, this could result in anywhere from a relatively small pool of content to hundreds of individual webpages within one website. For this study, coders were asked only to examine content that could be reached within three mouse clicks from the home web page. Empirical studies of web site usage report that the overwhelming majority of Internet users remain on the first, or main page, and only rarely click on subsequent pages (Dutton et al., 1999).

After examining academic and professional literature concerning the Internet, six conceptual categories were created to describe the utopian, democratic and egalitarian ideals of the Internet that have been put forth: a deliberative public sphere; the opportunity for activism; a space for marginalized voices; interconnected, instantaneous information; advertising and fundraising revenue; and accountability. The author then examined a random selection of non-profit websites outside of those examined in this study for specific variables of online functionality. These variables were organized within the six conceptual categories. If a variable did not 'fit' within a conceptual category, then the variable was deemed to be inappropriate for this study. While coders were asked to search for specific variables of functionality on non-profit web sites, they were not told that these variables were enveloped within the six larger conceptual categories.

Two graduate students were separately trained in the coding procedures but were not informed as to the scope of the project. Both coders were given examples of different value selections

within each of the possible variables and ample discussion ensued to ensure that coders were

completely knowledgeable as to the scope of the coding.

[INSERT "Contextual Framework of Coded Variables for Non-profit Websites" TABLE HERE]

Unpacking the Promise of Utopia

The Cohen's kappa measure of agreement between the two coders was 88.52 percent for all

variables.[1] Some of the findings from the content analysis were further examined and qualified

through the tradition of discourse and narrative analyses. When applicable, specific strategies of

signification (Mitra and Cohen, 1999) were identified in online non-profit content. In total, this study

attempted to analyze the use and narrative structure of Internet functionality that produced the

discourse of non-profit sites and compared these analyses with a quantitative measurement of online

content.

Deliberative public sphere

Democracy, or what has commonly been called government by discussion, has conversation

as its most central component. It is this conversation that allows for strengthened linkages between

members and their organizations (Diani, 2000). John Dewey argued years ago that if public life were

to be revitalized, it would be dependent upon the "methods and conditions of debate, discussion and

persuasion" (Dewey, 1927: 208). Several researchers have asserted that the Internet has created a

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[1] Values of kappa greater than .75 indicate excellent agreement beyond chance alone and

suggest a strong standard measure of reliability (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 1998). *Scott's Pi* was computed

at .79, representing the inter-coder agreement after chance has been removed. The *Scott's Pi* test

depends on basic probability theory and calculates the "chance agreement" based on the proportion

of times any particular value of a category is used (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 1998). This test is extremely

important in gauging the veracity of results between coders. The results here suggest that a reliable

coding scheme was utilized.

deeper deliberative democracy whereby a Habermasian public sphere of reflexive, rational discussion can develop (Dahlberg, 2000, Abe, 1998, Wilhelm, 2000).

Early researchers argued that the Internet could allow for an extraordinary opportunity to propel democratic participation (Ess, 1996), where individuals could assert their "ideas, concerns and demands before all others" (Dertouzos, 1991: 75). The Internet could allow for citizens and those with outside interests (Leonhirth et al., 1997, Streck, 1998), to problem-solve complicated issues (Murray, 1998). In fact, the technology alone was purported to be a means of "revitalizing the open and wide-spread discussions among citizens that feed the roots of democratic society" (Rheingold, 1993: 46). As one scholar stated, "the age of public sphere as face-to-face talk is clearly over: the question of democracy must henceforth take into account new forms of electronically mediated discourse" (Poster, 1997: 209).

This early promise of a democratic sphere suggested that the Internet could make possible "a resource that has never been available to non-profits before now: affordable, direct, interactive access to the public at large" (Civille, 1997: Introduction). By cultivating interactive, personalized, one-to-one relationships, non-profit organizations could grow strategically on the Internet (Peppers and Rogers, 1999) and encourage participatory behavior (Hardy and Scheufele, 2005).

Given the overwhelmingly positive findings relating to interactive technology, it was surprising to find that almost all non-profits in this study (94.2 percent) did not post information about email lists or listserves; 98.5 percent did not have any information on or evidence of newsgroups; 98.5 percent did not list information about discussion forums; and 95.7 percent of non-profit organizations did not provide chatrooms. This clearly problematizes research which has suggested that the Internet is a haven for deliberative democracy. If there is no forum for discourse between those that are in some way associated with the non-profit, there certainly can't be a public sphere – at least not in the Habermasian tradition.

[INSERT "Percentages from Variables Coded in Non-profit Websites" TABLE HERE]

One of the two chat rooms found in this study of non-profit organizations was not functioning and the second organization, DeafQueer.org, had no participants during any of the ten times that the site was visited. The one organization that did have a discussion forum, Parent to Parent of

Southwest Michigan, showed some evidence of use – although most of the postings were from the same individual. The non-profit organization offers "services at no cost to families who have children with disabilities or special needs" (2006h). The site was extremely well organized with six forums – news & events, autism, down syndrome, behavior issues, inclusion and general discussion. All of the forums were moderated by the same person, which might at first glance seem overtaxing. However, no topic had more than two replies and most (89.3 percent on average over the ten visits to the site) had none. Although there was minimal participation, there was plenty of lurking in the discussion forum. For example, a topic titled "U of M treadmill study for 7-10 year olds" had 119 views and 0 responses. Similarly, the topic titled "must-read book for teachers and parents" had 249 views and 0 responses. Thus, the discussion forum appeared to serve more as an online bulletin board than a discursive public sphere.

Even if one measures a public sphere through something as basic as the mere recognition of other voices, the Internet did not bode well for the non-profits in this sample. Seventy-seven percent of websites did not have a "hit counter" to keep track of how many visitors came to the site. Although it may be possible that the organizations had employed a hidden counter, the surface of what is visible to the viewer suggested that none exists. This omission implies that the organization "does not appear to be interested in who is hearing what is being said" (Mitra, 2004: 502).

Opportunity for activism

Activists are defined as "two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion tactics, or force" (Grunig, 1992: 504). Their success depends upon their ability to access and to use power resources (Heath, 1997). Because of these capabilities, others have argued that the Internet holds promise for activism (Scott and Street, 2000, Preece, 2000). In particular, the Internet could allow for increased density and centrality (Coombs, 1998) between individuals through strategic, focused information dissemination. In this case, density is the number of links a stakeholder has with other network members while centrality refers to the closeness, degree, and betweenness of members within a network. This connective web could then provide space for individuals to take action (Spencer, 2002).

The popular press argued years ago that the Internet could become a new tool for staging protests and demonstrations (Friess, 1999). With no central control point (Berman and Weitzner,

1997), activists could quickly mobilize. Sustained collective action could thrive on the Internet (Virnoche and Marx, 1997), particularly if it originated offline (Wellman and Salaff, 1996). The Internet could be an extremely effective tool for political movements (Curran and Couldry, 2003), as the relative success of the EZLN Zapatista movement in Mexico has shown (Kahn and Kellner, 2004).

For the first time in history, users could have the ability to produce, receive and distribute information with government officials (Bacard, 1993) whereby ordinary citizens could effectively participate in the democratic process (Atton, 2004). Indeed, some early scholars predicted that by making the system more responsive to those outside of the political sphere (Hacker, 1996), the Internet could ultimately lead to the removal of representation in government (Bertelson, 1992).

Unfortunately, this research did not support such optimism. Sixty-two percent of organizations did not provide any opportunity to volunteer on their websites. Of those that did provide a space for volunteerism, 40 percent requested users either phone or mail in their personal information. The remaining 60 percent of organizations soliciting volunteers allowed users to fill out an online form or send an email. This suggests that a high percentage of non-profits were not utilizing the Internet as a tool for mobilization and activism.

Exactly half of the non-profits sampled for this study posted a calendar of upcoming events on their site. However, almost all non-profit organizations did not post names of state or federal officials (95.7 percent) or their email address. (98.5 percent). Even more non-profits did not share state or federal officials' phone number (98.5 percent) or postal address (100 percent). A full 100 percent of non-profits did not have an online petition; 98.5 percent did not post rally information; 98.5 percent did not link to an email protest; and no non-profit posted information about an upcoming meeting.

It certainly could be argued that a portion of non-profits sampled for this study worked in areas and for causes that did not have direct applicability to rallies, online petitions, or access to government officials. However, the totality of these findings suggests that other factors may be at work. One possible cause could be a lack of faith in the level of activism efficacy possible on the Internet. This would counter recent research which suggests that the third sector is "increasingly aware of the potential of the Internet for effective advocacy" (Spencer, 2002: Advocacy). If Spencer is correct, then it may be that non-profits have now shifted away from this view of the Internet as a potential place for effective advocacy and moved toward the "inevitable subordination of ideals to material progress" (King et al., 1997: 5).

Advertising & fundraising revenue

Business has a strong financial interest in exploiting the Internet for commercial gain. There is ample evidence of concerted efforts aimed at designing an "interconnected regulatory framework with which global electronic commerce might evolve" (Simpson, 2004: 50). In a national survey of more than 1,000 non-profit professionals, nine out of 10 said that the Internet is an absolutely critical fundraising tool (2005c). In 1999, the estimated volume of fundraising achieved over the Internet was 24 percent of non-profit funding (Stewart, 1999). Only four years later, Internet fundraising increased to 48 percent of total funds raised in the non-profit sector (Wallace, 2004). Recent research shows that non-profit organizations are implementing e-commerce at a rapid pace (Boeder, 2002).

Yet, this research only partially supported the notion of a commercially-driven online presence for non-profits. Under half (43 percent) of non-profits had something for sale on their site, such as publications or promotional material. However, when sale items were found, they were presented with a high level of corporate sophistication. For example, Food First, an institute for "food and development policy" (2006g) sold gift certificates, books, T-shirts, DVD's and videos – all with the familiar consumer-savvy, Amazon-style, online shopping cart.

Sixty-five percent of organizations had the ability to raise donations on their website. Of those organizations that did, all accepted donations via credit card. Some organizations, such as Action Wisconsin, a non-profit aimed to "protect the civil rights of our state's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens and their families", signified donation levels by unique label classifications. A $35 donation qualified the user as a Member; $100 as an Activist; $250 as a Freedom Fighter; $500 as someone in the Mayoral Circle; and $1,000 as a participant in the Governor's Circle (2006b). These markers of prestige were presumably used to encourage higher donation levels through a commercialized 'high-pressure' sales pitch. At each level, one could move higher up the rank of society. In the first three tiers, one is merely attempting to struggle against 'the system', but in the last two tiers, one has succeeded and become part of it. These commercialized techniques, such as shopping carts and financial prestige levels, suggest that non-profits may have begun to embrace the corporate model embedded in our market-driven society.

However, this corporate proclivity did not extend to all financial areas. Seventy-six percent of non-profits did not appear to have any corporate sponsorship and 83.6 percent did not post any

advertising on their site. The one non-profit organization that had a corporate banner advertisement showed very limited sophistication in selecting their advertised corporate sponsor. Senior Love, a website "conceived from helping nursing home residents" had a large banner ad for "Vanity Toll-Free Numbers…to increase your sales , to enhance your brand" (2006i). One could assume that senior citizens are not the target demographic for vanity cell phone toll-free numbers. All other non-profit organizations that carried banner ads did so with advertisements from other non-profit organizations such as breastcancer.org.

Non-profits also weren't very forthcoming with their own financial information. Ninety percent of non-profits did not post their financial information and 88.5 percent did not post an annual report. This may be due to concerns about privacy, although one would not expect a high level of fiscal privacy given non-profits' 501(c)(3) status as tax-exempt charitable entities.

Space for marginalized voices

It has been said that the Internet has almost limitless potential to "achieve greater social equity and empowerment and improve everyday life for those on the margins of society" (Mehra et al., 2004: 781). This inclusive utopia could be realized through the enhanced, wide-ranging capacity for discourse on the Internet, which allows for "a more full expression and exchange of experiences" (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001: 5). For the first time in the history of mediated technology, those with little political influence could find more equality and greater communicative power online (Schultz, 2000). Through a shared purpose – and some strict community governance – fragmented marginalized groups can flourish into a unified, centered community (Preece, 2000).

Previous research (Watts, 2001) has argued that voices of the marginalized must locate spaces where the voice can be tangible. If one is denied material space in real life, it becomes that much more essential that they can locate their voice online (Mitra, 2004). Tangibility does not relate to the permanence of the message, but, simply the ability to make one's voice heard. It is here that others have suggested the Internet can deliver in its greatest promise of equality (Herring, 1996).

The process of discovering one's voice on the Internet is a "process of producing a representation" (Mitra, 2004: 494). It is this creation of representation that allows one's voice to be examined textually. However, this sample of non-profit organizations found no compelling evidence of marginalized voices on non-profit websites. The presence of the non-profit organization on the

Internet could feasibly constitute a marginalized voice. If one compares the representation of non-profit organizations on the Internet and in the mass media, that would certainly be true. Yet, if one is to look at non-profit websites as a portal for other marginalized voices to speak, the Internet does not prove to be as welcoming.

For example, The Grotto Foundation, which purports to "work with people from communities of different ethnic groups and cultures who are inspired by their sense of vision and possibility" (2006f) had no space for those actually within those communities to speak. Again, the organization itself constitutes a marginalized voice when juxtaposed against corporate media, but in its restriction of those that create the purpose and being of the organization, one has to question whether the Internet truly does serve as a space for marginalized voices. The site has information about a 'Native Languages Initiative' and 'American Indian Family Empowerment' but no first-person information from Native Americans. A similar example comes from the Maryland Crime Victim's Resource Center, which is touted as "one of the most successful grassroots organizations in the history of Maryland" (2006e). Here again, there is no opportunity for those who are actually victims of crime in Maryland to find their voice.

Further barometers of access were found lacking in this study. No organization sampled had a hearing disability option for content that was presented audibly. None of the organizations had any options for those with sight disabilities either. Ninety-eight percent of websites did not provide an option for alternative languages. When one was found, Spanish was the only option. This was surprising to find in organizations that were specifically aimed at those who were part of marginalized communities that often spoke a language other than English. For example, the American Association of Chinese Physicians (2006a) did not offer any content in Chinese; the Action for Post-Soviet Jewry (2006c) had no content in Hebrew or Russian and the Swedish Council (2006j) presented none of its content (outside of a blinking "Välkommen" on the opening page) in Swedish. These omissions are important as they set the framework for who is allowed to speak and how. Thus, even if content is presumably directed toward the Chinese, for example, the negation of the Chinese language suggests that it is not the truly marginalized (i.e. those without English speaking skills) that these non-profits are attempting to reach. Rather, these non-profits are speaking to those who have already attained a reasonably high level of assimilation in American culture.

There were a very few notable exceptions, such as Sustainable Harvest International (2005d), which had a Spanish-version site as well as stories/testimonials from South Americans. This site serves as a good example for language accessibility as it also did not present its second language option in English. Rather, at the top of the page, one could read in Spanish: "Programas Internacionales", "Quienes Somos", "Contáctenos" and "Inicio", which was directly on top of the English banner: "International Programs" "Who We Are" "Contact Us" and "Get Involved". Surprisingly, most sites that did offer a second language option, presented that choice in the English language. This does not suggest a high level of sophistication or understanding on the part of non-profits and signals to the user that the creator of the message has little interest in who is listening.

It is important to note that 83 percent of non-profit organizations did present their information through a low bandwidth technology and 93.8 percent did not require a login, which would presumably allow for users with varying technological means to access the information. While it may be that non-profits did not utilize high-bandwidth technology for financial reasons, it could equally have been for the more altruistic purpose of access. Only in-depth interviews with non-profits would help elucidate the reasons behind this finding.

Finally, some organizations have historically utilized 'guestbooks' for visitors to sign as a means for those potentially impacted by a non-profit to have their voices heard on a larger scale. Very few non-profits in this study employed this technology. Three out of the 70 sampled (95.7 percent) had a guestbook on their site. Of those that did, none had more than seven entries. One example comes from the Child's Cry Foundation, a non-profit aimed at helping downtown Dallas homeless and disadvantaged children. Their guestbook listed five guests (2005a) and each was extremely supportive of the organization and its work. One guest writes "Your site is beautiful. I love what you stand for" and another says "I love what you are doing for these children." This organization may deserve all the accolades being given, but since all comments that do exist are extremely positive and there are only a few comments posted, there did not appear to be much room for dissent or alternative perspectives. It is important to note that the user can not immediately post a comment to the site. Rather, the individual must first send their comment to the organization via email. One could assume, since there is no option to immediately post a comment, that they are open to evaluation, possible omission and/or editing on the part of the non-profit organization. This level of censorship on an individual's voice calls into question how much space marginalized voices actually do have, even

in a forum, such as a guestbook, that purports to open up the democratic sphere and share individual ideas with others. It is impossible to know whether the non-profit organization actually does censor comments forwarded to them via email without interviewing non-profit representatives themselves. However, given the chosen format of comment submission, it would problematize the idea of free expression for the individual who is sending the email. This inhibition could presumably curtail an individuals' inclination to comment.

Interconnected, instantaneous information

The ability for interconnected, instantaneous information was seen as an early indicator of user freedom on the Internet (Craig and Flood, 1998). Non-linear content could be seamlessly shifted and moved at the users' discretion (Landow, 1992) with great ease (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000). This interconnective world of large stores of data that users could seek out and retrieve based on their information needs (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001) could be available almost instantaneously (Fisher et al., 1996, Lunenfeld, 1999). The user could, very often, create new hypertexted flows of information that unfold in ways that the creator did not and could not intend. The only requirements for this new world of knowledge would be information and the ability to flow freely from one piece of content to another as if piecing together a collage (Landow, 1999).

This research discovered that the information found did not exploit the interconnective capability of the Internet. For example, a strong 85 percent of non-profits posted a mission statement on their site, but 72.9 percent of those that did had no link to interconnected content. The remaining 27 percent showed a link to internal content, but none of the mission statements found for this study linked with outside content. Further, a slight majority (56.6 percent) of non-profits posted information about other supporting organizations, but only 38 percent of those that did, provided an external link to that organization.

However, there were also some clear gaps in information provided to the user. Almost 80 percent of non-profits did not list employment opportunities on their site and of those that did, only one had a link to an external site for more or complementing information. An almost equal 86 percent of non-profits did not post any FAQ's (Frequently Asked Questions) and of those that did, only 11.6 percent had an internal link while none had an external link for more information. A majority of non-profits (58.9 percent) did not post their newsletter online and of those that did, none linked to external

information and only 25.6 percent linked to internal pages. None of the non-profits sampled for this study posted information about organizations opposing their own . Ninety-three percent of non-profit organizations did not post any related information pertaining to the government and of those that did, only one non-profit provided a corresponding external link to locate that information. Finally, 87.1 percent of non-profits did not have any related media information on their site, and of those who did post this information, only three organizations utilized an external link.

Indeed, when external links were found, they were predominately on rather static 'external links' pages that quickly blocked a user from easily moving to different topics within the context of other issues and information. Most organizations, such as the Child Abuse Prevention Center (2006d), did not have one external link on their entire webpage outside of a "Web links" page. It should be noted that the responsibility for maintaining external links may be too great for many non-profit organizations in an online world where url's change every second. However, when considering previous research concerning the potential of hypertext communication, the lack of external links found has important theoretical ramifications. In an early writing about hypertext, Landow wrote that it is a "mode that both emphasizes and bridges gaps, and that thereby inevitably becomes an art of assemblage in which appropriation and catachresis rule" (Landow, 1999: 170). In this study, users were left to deal with static content that was meant to be read in a linear fashion, much like printed text.

Finally, the majority of non-profits (77.5 percent) did not have a search function on their site and an almost equal 76.7 percent did not present a site index. It was often impossible to discern how pertinent the information was, as only 21.7 percent of non-profits posted 'date updated' information. The lack of a last updated date was found even in very technologically sophisticated sites. This omission is an important one if sites wish to have any credibility in the pertinence of their message.

Accountability

Publicity has always been a political resource for social movements and non-profit organizations — an essential political resource. Gitlin first stated that the media image, "tends to become 'the movement' for wider publics and institutions who have few alternative sources of information" (Gitlin, 1980: 3). The media provide information to others, which plays a fundamental structural role in personal decision-making (Gandy Jr., 1982). Media content becomes an

"authoritative version of reality, a way of knowing associated with high levels of cultural legitimacy" (Barker-Plummer, 1995: 306). Thus, media offer a type of membership of knowledge that participators engage in and learn from. The media continue to be the place where publics attempt to define themselves and obtain legitimacy from elites in society (Aufderheide, 1994).

The importance of media to non-profit organizations has been made clear. Yet, non-profit organizations and activist groups have long charged that traditional mass media misrepresent their purpose or polarize their issues to the general news audience (Lang and Lang, 1981, Kensicki, 2000, Barker-Plummer, 1996, Gitlin, 1980, van Zoonen, 1992). Their frustration has stemmed from the knowledge that those who control power within society have traditionally created the mass ideology of citizen organizations (Grossberg *et al.*, 1998). However, the arrival of the Internet has allowed for organizations to present their own ideology to a truly mass audience — without any mediation — for the first time in history. This ability to pass the traditional media gatekeepers is the central reason for the Internet's ability to rival mainstream outlets (Hume, 1995). It also makes the non-profit organization more accountable for their message.

Without a mass mediated intermediary, the non-profit organization could now build, or lose, credibility through their online message and their online accountability. This accountability can be an essential tool for non-profits in their effort to create a sense of community while developing relationships with members, volunteers, sponsors and the public (Spencer, 2002). Without accountability, online users could begin to question the very idea of community, trust and power through the Internet. Previous research has suggested that an exchange of true identities online is a key component to community building (Calhoun, 1998) and trust (Mitra and Watts, 2003). In addition, how one constructs their own identity is directly linked to issues of power (Foucault, 1972). If there is no human connection behind declarative statements made on a web page then the reader is left in an immobilized position. Without any accountability, the online user must decide whether to accept what is said and trust that this disembodied voice is telling a truth previously unknown; reject any and all claims outright; or search out verification. However, it is very difficult for an Internet user to determine the credibility or validity of an online message (Burbules, 2001) as it requires an investment in time to check the facts through other sources. Therefore, most users passively accept information given and retreat into an immobilized position. Given that non-profits have a deep interest in community

building, such a location of weakness on the part of the user can be devastating to an organizations' effort.

Therefore, it was surprising to find very little accountability on the websites of non-profit organizations. Working email links were found relatively often (85.1 percent), but the overwhelming majority (84.3 percent) of email links were general contacts rather than a named individual. In fact, almost half (48.8 percent) of non-profit websites did not list an actual contact name anywhere within the three degrees of analysis. Perhaps, more confounding was that a substantial percentage of those who did give a contact name, did not provide their email address (26.8 percent). When a mission statement was found on a non-profits' site, most (65 percent) did not have a listed author, whether that be an individual or a collective group, such as a board of directors.

If accountability was measured through other means, such as a phone number or fax machine number listed, then the results were more promising. Almost 90 percent of non-profit websites posted a phone number for their organization. Although only 67.4 percent of websites listed a fax number.

Perhaps these findings are not terribly surprising given that The Consumers Union recently denounced the web as "one of the poorest examples of public disclosure" (Consumer Union, 2001: 6). However, it is somewhat distressing for an industry, such as the non-profit sector, that depends on building credibility and publicity for survival. Research has found that contact information is one of the major predictors of online credibility (Fogg et al., 2002). Without this contact information, non-profit organizations may be doing themselves a great disservice. Others have agreed and argued that only by examining a site for authority can one make a thorough estimation of source credibility (Glantz, 2000).

This lack of credibility could be further affected by errors on a non-profit's site. Twenty-six percent of websites had grammatical errors – a key marker for users in their determination of credibility (Burbules, 2001). When compounded with a lack of authority found on non-profit websites, the non-profits in this sample may be doing themselves some harm with their online presence.

Discussion

This research found very little evidence of the online utopia once promised for non-profits in any area outside of fundraising. None of the variables used to determine a deliberative public sphere

were found to any meaningful degree and activism through non-profit websites was found to be almost nonexistent. There was little space for marginalized voices on non-profit web pages and while information certainly was in abundant supply, it remained static and disconnected from the rest of the World Wide Web. There was also very little accountability for the content found on the websites of non-profit organizations. Taken in sum, it does not appear that the Internet has fulfilled many earlier hopes of a democratic and deliberative utopia.

However, the promise of online fundraising did appear to be developing for non-profits. The majority of non-profits in this sample had the ability to raise donations on their website and almost the same number had items for sale online. Clearly, there is no way to know if either of these online functions have been financially beneficial for the non-profit without interviewing non-profits representatives. As was stated earlier, a future study could interview individuals responsible for the content examined in this research to better understand why non-profit organizations have pursued online fundraising and if the promise of online fundraising has been financially beneficial.

Non-profits appeared to show their greatest strengths in providing basic low-bandwidth information to online users and basic information, such as a mission statement, phone number and fax number. Roughly half of the organizations provided information about other supporting non-profit organizations as well as a calendar of events. While this may not be the democratic, deliberative public sphere projected by early adopters, it is a small step toward that goal. If democracy truly is government by discussion, then online users now have ample access to an essential component of the discursive process – information.

It is important to note that the findings here can only be limited to the non-profit organizations sampled. Given the almost limitless expanse of the World Wide Web, it would be impossible to sample a representative population of non-profits online. However, these findings suggest that non-profit organizations have a long way to go in developing the Internet as a deliberative, interconnected, accountable tool for non-profit organizations and an instantaneous. discursive, activist, space for the users of these websites. A larger sample size, coupled with in-depth interviews, would help reveal the actual extent of non-profit content online and the reasons behind the content found.

Contextual Framework of Coded Variables for Non-profit Websites

Contextual Framework	Coded Variables
Deliberative public sphere	Chat rooms Email lists or listserves Newsgroups Hit counters
Opportunity for activism	Volunteer information Calendar of events Name of state or federal officials Email address of state or federal officials Phone number of state or federal officials Postal address of state or federal officials Online petition Rally information Email protest Information about upcoming meeting
Advertising & fundraising revenue	Ability to donate online Sponsorship Advertising Annual report Financial information Items for sale
Space for marginalized voices	Sight disability option Hearing disability option Language option Bandwidth option Login requirement Guestbooks
Interconnected, instantaneous information	Employment opportunities Hypertext links in employment opportunities Mission statement Hypertext links in mission statement FAQ's Hypertext links in FAQ's Supporting organization information Hypertext links in supporting information Opposing organization information Hypertext links in opposing information Government information Hypertext links in government information Media information Hypertext links to media information Date updated Search function Site index Newsletter
Accountability	Email of organization Name of email recipient Contact name Type of contact information Phone number of organization Fax number of organization Mission statement author Grammatical errors

Percentages Found of Variables Coded in Non-profit Websites

Variables	Percentage
Deliberative public sphere	
Chat rooms	4.3
Email lists or listserves	5.8
Newsgroups	1.5
Hit counters	23.0
Opportunity for activism	
Volunteer information	38.0
Calendar of events	50.0
Name of state or federal officials	4.3
Email address of state or federal officials	1.5
Phone number of state or federal officials	1.5
Postal address of state or federal officials	0
Online petition	0
Rally information	1.5
Email protest	1.5
Information about upcoming meeting	0
Advertising & fundraising revenue	
Ability to donate online	65.0
Sponsorship	24.0
Advertising	16.4
Annual report	11.5
Financial information	10.0
Items for sale	43.0
Space for marginalized voices	
Sight disability option	0
Hearing disability option	0
Language option	2.0
Bandwidth option	17.0
Login requirement	6.2
Guestbooks	4.3
Interconnected, instantaneous information	
Employment opportunities	19.8
Mission statement	85.0
FAQ's	14.0
Supporting organization information	56.6
Opposing organization information	0
Government information	7.0
Media information	12.9
Date updated	21.7
Search function	22.5
Site index	23.3
Newsletter	41.1
Accountability	
Email of organization	85.1
Name of email recipient	15.7
Contact name	51.2
Phone number of organization	90.0
Fax number of organization	67.4
Mission statement author	35.0
Grammatical errors	26.0

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