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The Internet as a tool for democracy? A survey of non-profit Internet decision-makers and Web users

by Linda Jean Kenix

Abstract

Although research has urged scholars and practitioners to develop the Internet as a democratic tool, little research has examined how users actually use the Internet and how the Internet is conceptualized by those who create its content — particularly in the non–profit sector where questions of democracy, interconnected communication and information gathering are often central to survival. This research surveys 688 people associated with non–profit organizations in the United States to better understand their perceptions and uses of the Internet as a tool for social change.

Contents

Introduction

Technology has not historically been conducive to creating a strong sense of community (Rucinski, 1991). However, the Internet showed early signs of promise in reversing this trend. Scholars and populists alike predicted that the Internet would allow for sweeping

improvements in democratic participation (Bertelson, 1992). Even those questioning such utopian notions agreed that the Internet is "qualitatively the most radical and sweeping of these new communication technologies." [1] With no central control point (Berman and Weitzner, 1997) and the ability for users to produce, receive and distribute information with government officials (Bacard, 1993) almost instantaneously (Fisher, *et al.*, 1996; Lunenfeld, 1999) ordinary citizens could now use the Internet to better participate in the democratic process (Atton, 2004). The technology of the Internet itself appeared to allow for horizontal and vertical flow of communication (Stromer–Galley, 2000), physical connectivity, data communality, interactivity and ease of use (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000). Internet users could potentially exchange information interactively and participate directly (Bertelson, 1992) for a relatively low cost (Coombs, 1998) — presumably making the system more responsive to those outside of the political sphere (Hacker, 1996). The end result of this progression would inevitably be the removal of representation in government — through the Internet, citizens could participate in a direct democracy (Bertelson, 1992).

Yet, with all the technological advancements, dramatic shifts in democracy and social change have not followed. 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 (Public Affairs Television, 2004) although there has been recent signs of a renewed interest in voting (Lester, 2006). Yet, citizens do not trust governmental institutions (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1998), many citizens simply do not actively seek out political information online (Davis, 1999; Sparks, 2001), there remain no citizen initiatives at the national level (Becker, 2001) and unlike earlier claims of a direct democracy, citizens continue to seek representation from governmental officials. It is important to note that this level of civic disengagement cannot be quantitatively traced to the Internet. However, what is clear is that the claims for democratic advancements after the Internet have not happened. Certainly, there have been successes. The Independent Media movement, the organization against the G8 summit in Seattle, and the McLibel case against McDonalds are just a few examples. However, the advent of new democratic processes because of the Internet has not been made clear (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001; Diani, 2000).

The three major camps critically examining the Internet's democratic capabilities have centered on questions of general access (Dutta–Bergman, 2005, U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999; Katzman, 1974; Lengel, 1998; Selwyn, 2004), content corporatization and commercialization (Dahlberg, 2000; Habermas, 1989; Jensen, 1997; McChesney, 2000; Samoriski, 2000) or universal usage patterns (Kelly and Lewis, 2001; LaRose, *et al.*, 2003; Leonhirth, *et al.*, 1997; Streck, 1998). Thus, while there have been critical explorations into the democratic components of the Internet, the majority of research has centered on general communicative issues outside the realm of citizen non–profit participation for the purpose of social change. Yet, some scholarly investigation has suggested that the Internet remains a strong democratizing tool because of its inherent interactive capabilities alone (Bolter, 1991; Coombs, 1998; Dahlberg, 2001; Flower, 1995; Kapor, 1994; Mitra, 1997).

Although research has urged scholars and practitioners to develop the Internet as a democratic tool (Salter, 2004), little research examines how users actually use the Internet and how the Internet is conceptualized by those who create its content. Most of those that have examined Internet usage, have looked at the general population (Hargittai, 2004; Selwyn, *et al.*, 2005) rather than non–profits (Boeder, 2002). Further, no research could be found that actually evaluates perceptions from those who actually create non–profits' Internet strategy or Web content. Thus, it remains unknown if those responsible for creating non–profit content actually think that the Internet is a purposeful and important tool in creating social change and whether those who use the technology within the non–profit sector agree.

This research is built on the supposition that the users and creators of Web content, and not technology alone, predicate social change. Therefore, the impressions and perceptions of those who create Web content are vitally important in understanding the nascent history of social change through the Internet, the present state of that technology for non–profit organizations,

and the possible future directions for this continuously burgeoning communication tool. In this research, 429 people responsible for creating Web content for a non–profit organization and 259 individuals otherwise associated with a non–profit organization were surveyed concerning their perceptions, negotiations and uses of the Internet as a tool for social change. The 259 individuals otherwise associated with a non–profit were important to juxtapose against those creating Web content to see if there were any reported differences between groups.

Non–profit organizations and the Internet

Non–profit organizations are inherently diverse along almost any measurement of categorization: size, activities, clients, approach, origins, and financial security. However, despite this diversity there appears to be some common characteristics (Spencer, 2002). The overwhelming majority of non–profit organizations are small, community–based groups that rely heavily on volunteers. Non–profit organizations tend to agree on shared causes and are dedicated to a progressive process of social change for the betterment of themselves and others, rather than a strictly financial or consumer–driven business model (Spencer, 2002). Certainly, there are many right–wing and non–political non–profits but these organizations also strive to create social change for what they believe to be the betterment of themselves and others. Because of the overall adherence to democratic principles, non–profit organizations are a good measure of democracy at work on the Internet.

While initially slow to adopt new technologies in the past (Jamieson, 2000), non–profit organizations have increasingly adopted new technological modes of action. While it was difficult to even find non–profits online before 1999 (Boeder, 2002), they have been turning to the Internet at a faster rate — particularly large non–profits (Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2001). In 2001, almost 85 percent of non–profits sampled in the United Kingdom reported engaging with new technologies (Burt and Taylor, 2001). However, motives for engaging with new technologies so have "remained largely familiar, conventional and instrumental." [2] Indeed, non–profits have adopted new technologies to varying degrees, but the fundamental need for coverage from the media (including the Internet) has kept the politics of social change relatively unchanged (Scott and Street, 2000). Publicity has always been a political resource for social movements and non–profit organizations — an essential political resource. Gitlin stated that the media image, "tends to become 'the movement' for wider publics and institutions who have few alternative sources of information." [3] The media provide information to others, which plays a fundamental structural role in personal decision–making (Gandy, 1982). Media content becomes an "authoritative version of reality, a way of knowing associated with high levels of cultural legitimacy." [4] 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).

Non–profit organizations are already fighting the almost insurmountable task of presenting activities in an appealing way for the potential recruit (Olson, 1965). In media–saturated societies, "voice in the news is a key part of making one's 'account count' in the public sphere." [5] Traditionally, media has served as a symbolic form of power for an organization because with it, groups have the possibility for achieving the social change they are striving for. 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 (Barker–Plummer, 1996; Gitlin, 1980; Kensicki, 2000; Lang and Lang, 1981; 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). The Internet can be an important arena for non–profits to 'get out their message' given

that many are "skeptical of what counts as balance in the mainstream media." [6] This ability to pass the traditional media gatekeepers is the central reason for the Internet's ability to rival mainstream outlets (Hume, 1995).

In 2007, North American Internet usage stood at 211 million, which represents 69.9 percent of the total population (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2007). This means that almost seventy percent of the U.S. population actually use, rather than only have access to, the Internet. With this unprecedented growth of the Internet, has come the potential benefits of self–representation for non–profit organizations as well as the ability to communicate with other individuals and organizations that have similar causes — essentially forming a Habermasian public sphere. The Internet now makes possible "a resource that has never been available to non–profits before now: affordable, direct, interactive access to the public at large." [7] The technology allows for an extraordinary opportunity to propel democratic participation (Ess, 1996), where individuals can assert their "ideas, concerns and demands before all others." [8] In fact, the technology alone could likely be "a way of revitalizing the open and widespread discussions among citizens that feed the roots of democratic society." [9] 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." [10]

It has been argued that non–profits could improve their public education, fund–raising, 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). Free–flow communication in organizational processes (McAdam, 1996), which has been shown to be beneficial to an organization's growth, could flourish on the Internet. With the advent of the Internet, non–profits can 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). Certainly, governmental organizations and businesses with a commercial interest have many of these shared concerns. Yet, scholars have argued that non–profit organizations, with their particular emphasis on advocacy, volunteerism, fund–raising, and relationship building (Johnson, 1999), appear to have a unique opportunity to use the Internet as a Habermasian public sphere in the way that many early scholars predicted.

The third sector is "increasingly aware of the potential of the Internet for effective advocacy" [11] and it implicitly understands the importance of community building (Jamieson, 2000). Indeed, the "primary mission [of a non–profit organization] is to constantly build and develop a force of individuals who understand and support the initiatives the organization would like to take." [12] Research has argued that through three main functions — e–mail, listservs, and a Web presence (Spencer, 2002), advocacy and community building on the Internet could flourish. If users continue to rely on e–mail for routine communication because of its simplicity and ease of use, effective e–mail contacts could support continued advocacy and organizational Web site use. Meanwhile, more complex issues could be more effectively discussed in a listserv (e–mail list), chatroom or newsgroup forum, where information can be shared and feedback given. Finally, research suggests that the Web could serve as a space for strategic, focused information dissemination, which provides specific space for individuals to take action (Spencer, 2002).

However, all this enthusiasm for the Internet must be balanced with general online usage patterns that don't necessarily bode well for the long term health of democracy. While Internet networks influence public exposure to information (Bikson and Panis, 1999; Whillock, 1997), many simply do not actively seek out political information online (Davis, 1999; Sparks, 2001). Other studies have found that users do not read online public affairs news as often as previous surveys had suggested (Tewksbury, 2003) and the political information that does exist online remains one–way and does not add to information found on existing media outlets (Robbin, *et al.*, 2004).

With all of the possible benefits that using the Internet can bring, the question clearly becomes: are non–profits actually using — and benefiting from — the Internet? How do they gauge the efficacy of their actions? Are the utopian projections of a flourishing online community translating to off–line action? And, how do those who actually use the technology feel about the benefits of the Internet? Is there a disconnect between those that create online content and others? It is to these questions that this research now turns.

Hypotheses

Research site

Given the stated importance of the Internet for non–profit organizations, one would think that those responsible for creating online content would be more likely to support the Internet's interactive and potentially democratic technologies than those who are only otherwise associated with an organization. If we are to follow previous research suggesting the extensive benefits of the Internet, it is suggested that these Internet decision–makers, the creators of Web content, would invest in some of these hopes. These creators would also constitute some of the primary and regular users of the non–profits' Web site and therefore, have an additional interest in its democratic development and usage. The following hypotheses test this basic assumption.

H1: Creators of online content for non-profit organizations will use the Internet more to promote their cause, interact with members and reach potential donors than to provide information.

H2: Creators of online content for non–profit organizations will use the Internet for external information gathering more than non–profit members (as evidenced by visiting Web sites that support and oppose the organization and the belief that the Internet is an effective tool for staying informed).

H3: Creators of online content for non–profit organizations will report high levels of information on their own non–profit organizations' web site (as evidenced by offering contact information for legislators, past and current newsletters, employment opportunities and protest rally information).

H4: Creators of online content for non–profit organizations will be stronger proponents of the Internet's democratic capabilities than non–profit members (as evidenced by perceived impact on social change, interaction with government, political power and influence on democracy).

H5: Creators of online content for non–profit organizations will be stronger proponents of the Internet's benefits than non–profit members (as

evidenced by perceived visibility and credibility, and the belief that organizations without a Web presence are at a disadvantage).

H6: Creators of online content for non–profit organizations will use the Internet for interconnectedness more than non–profit members (as evidenced by use and perceived benefits of e–mail lists, newsgroups, chatrooms, and online petitions).

Method

Participants were randomly recruited from two sources: Guidestar, an online national database of non–profit organizations and the *National Directory of Non–profit Organizations*. This is a database comprised of non–profit organizations within the United States, where this research was conducted. Those responsible creating their non–profit organizations' Web site were contacted via e–mail and asked to forward the survey url to five other individuals otherwise associated with their non–profit organization. For security purposes, each organization had a unique identification number assigned to them that was embedded in their individual url login.

A pre–test was organized to ascertain the most efficient means of reaching respondents. Four hundred and seventy two organizations were approached through four different methods: 118 (472 divided by 4) were sent an e–mail every week for four weeks with instructions on filling out the survey; 118 were sent one e–mail twice, every two weeks; 118 were sent an e–mail every week for four weeks with a stated option for a hard–copy questionnaire to be immediately mailed to them with a postage–paid envelope; and 118 organizations were sent an e–mail twice, every two weeks with the same option for a hard–copy questionnaire. In total, 180 individuals responded, resulting in a overall response rate of 38 percent. However, those who were sent an e–mail every week for four weeks with the option of a hard–copy questionnaire had the highest response rate of 44 percent. From the total of 472 possible respondents, only one actually requested a hard copy questionnaire.

Following these results from the pre–test mail out, 1,400 organizations across the United States were sent the same e–mail used in the pre–test every week for four weeks with the option of a hard copy questionnaire to be mailed to them with a postage–paid envelope. Of this list of non–profit organizations, 508 individuals responded, resulting in a 36 percent response rate. This e–mail response rate is slightly above what would be expected from a complex, detailed postal survey (Swan, *et al.*, 1999). Two respondents from this group filled out their questionnaire via a hard copy. The 508 respondents were combined with the 180 who responded to the pre–test mail out for a total of 688 participants in the survey.

Participants in the survey were given an unique questionnaire dependent upon their status as either a creator of online content for a non–profit organizations or as an individual otherwise associated with a non–profit organization. All of the surveys were created after an extensive series of focus group sessions with 52 non–profit organization representatives were held in San Francisco, Austin and New York. These focus group sessions highlighted key areas of concern for non–profit organizations and supplied a framework for pertinent questions.

Given the multitude of survey respondents, few open–ended questions were used. The majority of questions followed either a dichotomous yes/no option or a five–point Likert scale whereby respondents chose their most appropriate answer. All respondents were given the

chance to have the total survey results sent to them when the data collection was complete. Ninety–one percent of respondents chose to see the results after the data collection.

Significance was measured by using the non–parametric chi–square statistical test as well as phi and adjusted residuals. Strong effects of a particular case of one variable on a particular case of another variable were found if not more than 20 percent of the cells had expected values less than five (SPSS, 1999). Adjusted residuals were examined to determine the difference between the observed count for a particular cell and its expected count. Values well below –2 or above +2 identified cells that departed markedly from the model of independence, suggesting a particular direction in a relationship that could not be expected by chance alone.

Operationalization of terms

Respondents were asked a series of questions that depended upon the operationalization of several key terms. These were defined for participants in relation to specific questions at hand:

> Promote a cause — Language that specifically aims to advance the positive achievements of an organization.
>
> Interact with members — Two–way communication between members of an organization and representatives of that organization.
>
> Reach potential donors — Language with the explicit purpose of soliciting money from users.
>
> Provide information — Language that informs users without any mention of sponsorship, promotion or an invitation to interact.
>
> External information gathering — Exploring Web sites that support and oppose your organization.
>
> Interconnectedness — Utilization of e–mail lists, newsgroups, chatrooms and online petitions.

Results

Non–profit organizations

Respondents were categorized into two groups: creators of online content for non–profit organizations and those otherwise associated with the non–profit. E–mail messages were sent to non–profit organizations with the request that the e–mail message be forwarded to those responsible for creating content online. In sum, 429 people responded who categorized themselves as creators of online content while 259 people categorized themselves as otherwise associated with the non–profit. This relatively lower number of respondents from individuals otherwise associated with the non–profit suggests that many those individuals otherwise associated with the non–profit either chose not to respond to the survey or did not receive the e–mail message.

Both categories of people were asked their title within the organization (President/Founder, Vice President, Communications Specialist, Volunteer Coordinator, Administrative, Webmaster, PR or Events Coordinator, Managerial, Activist/Participant or Member). Of those who responded that they were responsible for creating online content, 51 percent claimed to be the President/Founder of the organization and 11 percent broadly defined themselves as managerial. Of those who responded that they weren't responsible for creating online content, 31.3 percent identified as Activist/Participant or Member and 27 percent as the President/Founder of the organization.

Those identifying as responsible for creating online content tended to be with the organization for less time than those who were otherwise associated with the organization. Nineteen percent (*SE(p) = .097*) of respondents responsible for creating content had been with their organization over 10 years while 24.7 percent (*SE(p) = .136*) of those not responsible for creating content had been with their organization the same amount of time. The relatively small *standard error of proportion (SE(p))* found throughout this study was due to the lack of variability in case values (Riffe, *et al.*, 1998).

Of the total 688 respondents (429 people responsible for creating online content in addition to 259 people otherwise associated with the organization) only 18.9 percent of those polled reported that their organization had over 45 paid and unpaid employees. Rather, it was reported that a majority (58 percent (*SE(p) = .094*) of organizations had under 12 paid and unpaid employees. Almost all of the organizations were not affiliated with any political party (97 percent (*SE(p) = .011*).

Given a choice between 14 different categories of organizations, 24 percent (*SE(p) = .1918*) of respondents classified their organization as educational, 22.1 percent as human services, 11.4 percent as arts, 11.4 percent as religious, 6.5 percent as health or fitness and 6.1 percent as youth.

The almost total majority of respondents (93.9 percent, *(SE(p) = .027*) stated that their organization was a 501(c)(3) IRS tax–designated organization. This IRS designation allows a non–profit charitable organization's income to be tax–exempt, offers eligibility for grants and funding, allows donors to make contributions and receive a tax deduction on their tax return, and offers the possibility for free radio and PSA announcements provided by local media (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2007). A small number of respondents (8.9 percent *(SE(p) = .101)*) said that the operating budget for their organization was over US$5 million. Of the remaining respondents, 17.9 percent reported an operating budget of their non–profit organization between US$1 and US$5 million, 9.8 percent reported budgets in the range of US$500,000 to US$1 million, 14.7 percent of respondents said their organization was between US$250,000 and US$500,00, 14.9 percent between US$100,000 and US$250,000, 18.4 percent between US$25,000 and US$100,000 and 15.4 percent of respondents said their organizations' operating budget was under US$25,000.

A near totality (97.9 percent, *(SE(p) = .007*) of those responsible for creating online content said that the Internet was available at the geographical location of the non–profit organizations' operations and that the organization itself had a Web site presence (90.7 percent, *SE(p) = .022*) that became operational in between 1995 and 1999 (48.3 percent) or after 2000 (42.5 percent). However, it appears organizations were using the Internet before they themselves went online. A larger 74.6 percent *(SE(p) = .101)* online content creators reported their organizations first used the Internet between 1995 and 1999 and a smaller 20.1 percent first used the Internet after 2000.

Online content creators for non–profit organizations & those otherwise associated with the non–profit

Those surveyed for this study were heavy Internet users. Seventy–six percent *(SE(p) = .043)* of content creators reported using the Internet constantly or very often at work and 90.7

percent *(SE(p) = .036)* used e–mail in particular constantly or very often at work. Almost 70 percent *(SE(p) = .035)* of this group felt that the Internet had significantly contributed to their productivity at work. Similarly, 74 percent *(SE(p) = .048)* of those otherwise associated with the non–profit said that they constantly or very often use the Internet outside of e–mail. A near totality of those otherwise associated with the non–profit (96.5 percent, *(SE(p) = .034)* said they constantly or very often use e–mail.

When asked how often they used the Web site of their own non–profit organization, 72 percent *(SE(p) = .053)* of online content creators reported checking the site at least once a day. Fifty–three percent *(SE(p) = .072)* of those otherwise associated with the non–profit checked the Web site every day. This suggests rather clearly that those surveyed who were not responsible for creating content within the non–profit organization were heavy users of the Internet in general and their non–profits' Web site in particular.

Hypothesis 1

Nearly 41 percent *(SE(p) = .074)* of content creators said that the principle reason their organization went online was to provide information for educational purposes, while 38.6 percent said it was to promote their cause. A relatively small 6.5 percent said it was to interact with members.

Only 3.5 percent content creators said the purpose of the Internet was to reach potential and present donors. Indeed, just over half (57.8 percent *(SE(p) = .026*) of content creators polled reported that their Web sites had the capacity for individuals to donate online. However, 44.3 percent *(SE(p) = .076)* of content creators felt that the Internet was very effective, effective or somewhat effective as a tool for fund–raising. Conversely, almost 82 percent *(SE(p) = .024)* of those otherwise associated with the non–profit said that they had never donated to their non–profit organization via the Internet and 71.4 percent *(SE(p) = .029)* said that they had never donated to any non–profit organization via the Internet.

Hypothesis 1, which stated that creators of online content for non–profit organizations will use the Internet more to promote their cause, interact with members and reach potential donors than to provide information, was not accepted.

Hypothesis 2

The relationship between the different groups of respondents and the propensity to visit Web sites of those that oppose the organizations' cause was found to be significant (ρ = .000) with additional measures of association validating that significance (φ = .498) (see Table 1). Adjusted residuals showed that those otherwise associated with the non–profit were much more likely to never (4.0) or almost never (7.6) visit the site of an organization that opposes their non–profits' cause than would be expected by chance alone. The relationship between both groups of respondents and the propensity to visit Web sites of organizations that support their cause was also significant (ρ = .000). Here again, those otherwise associated with the non–profit were much more likely to never (2.1) or almost never (3.5) visit the site of an organization that supports their non–profits' cause than would be expected by chance alone. Internet content creators were, conversely, much more likely to visit the sit of an organization that either supported or opposed their non–profits' cause.

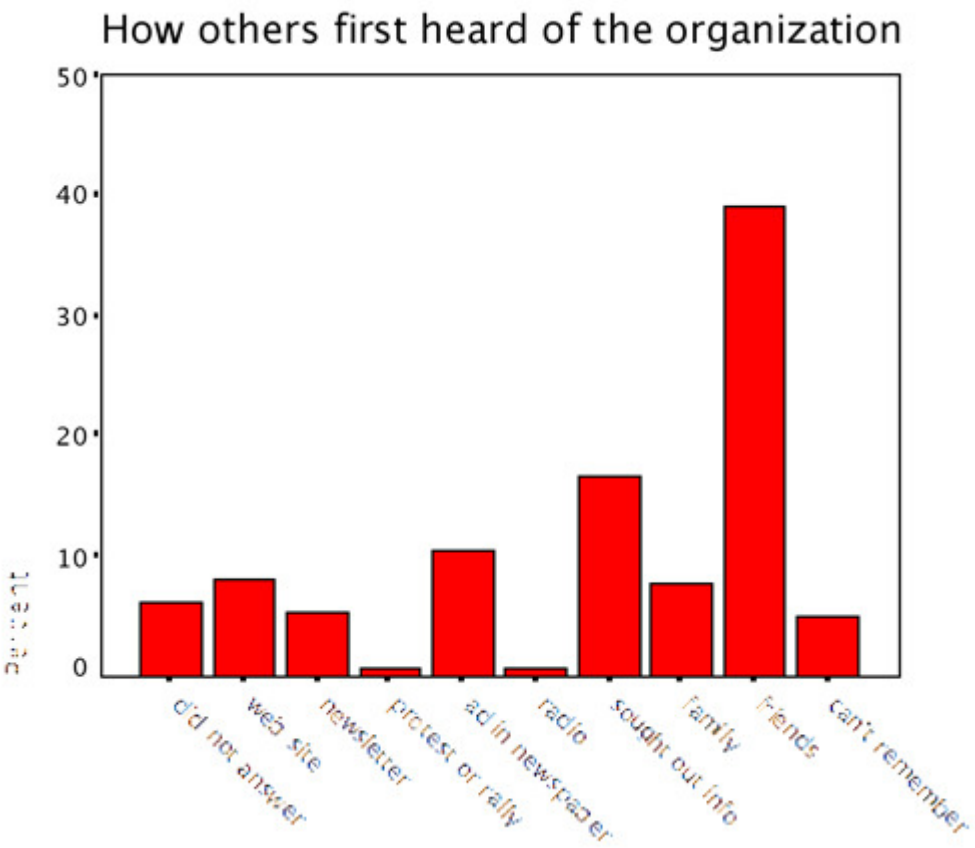
Table 1			
Relationship between respondents and ...	**P value**	**Phi**	**More likely group**

Propensity to visit Web sites of those that oppose the organizations' cause	.000	.498	Internet content creators
Propensity to visit Web sites of those that support the organizations' cause	.000	.367	Internet content creators
Belief that the Internet is a tool for staying informed	.000	.641	Internet content creators
Perceived impact of the Internet on social change	.000	.598	Internet content creators
Relationship between the Internet and interaction with government	.009	.421	Internet content creators
Relationship between the Internet and increased political power	.011	.401	Internet content creators
Perception of the Internet as a democratic tool	.000	.612	Internet content creators
Internet's impact on the organizations' visibility	.000	.501	Internet content creators
Internet's impact on the organizations' credibility	.019	.387	Internet content creators
Belief that those without a Web site are at a disadvantage	.000	.579	Internet content creators
E–mail list usage	.008	.131	MORE THAN 20% EXPECTED VALUES LESS THAN 5
Perceived benefit of e–mail lists	.000	.631	Internet content creators
Newsgroup usage	.000	.611	Those otherwise associated with the non–profit
Perceived benefit of newsgroups	.000	.513	Those otherwise associated with the non–profit
Chatroom usage	.037	.111	PHI VALUE LOWER THAN ACCEPTABLE LEVEL

Perceived benefit of chatrooms	.000		Internet content creators
Online petition usage	.000	.605	Those otherwise associated with the non–profit
Perceived benefit of online petitions	.057	.105	P VALUE NOT SIGNIFICANT

Eighty–five percent *(SE(p) = .071)* of content creators felt that the Internet has been very effective, effective or somewhat effective for educational purposes and overwhelmingly reported that the Internet is a very effective, effective or somewhat effective tool for staying informed (97.7 percent, *(SE(p) = .040*). Almost all (91 percent *(SE(p) = .017)* of Internet decision–makers reported using the Internet to research topics relating to the organizational mission. Indeed, there was a significant relationship between the groups of respondents and the belief that the Internet is a tool for staying informed (ρ = .000). Internet content creators were much more likely to believe the Internet was a very effective tool for staying informed (4.6) than those otherwise associated with the non–profit (-4.6).

Over two–thirds (69.1 percent *(SE(p) = .046*) of those otherwise associated with the non–profit felt that the Internet was only somewhat reliable and accurate. Although, most (67.9 percent) of those otherwise associated with the non–profit felt that their non–profits' site was very useful or quite useful. Further, only 8.1 percent *(SE(p) = .172)* of those otherwise associated with the non–profit reported joining the organization because of information they learned on the Internet. Almost 40 percent of those otherwise associated with the non–profit first heard about the organization through friends and 10.4 percent learned of the organization through an advertisement in the newspaper (see Figure 1). Of those in this group who had a Web site themselves, 60.2 percent *(SE(p) = .061)* did not have a link to the non–profit organization on their Web site. Thus, Hypothesis 2, which stated that Internet content creators for non–profit organizations will use the Internet for information gathering more than those otherwise associated with the non–profit was supported.



Hypothesis 3

Internet content creators were first asked if any of the following were applicable to their Internet presence: legislator contact information or protest/rally information on their Web site; and e–mail campaigns that inform policy members. Of those Internet content creators who agreed these items were very or somewhat applicable to their organization, almost all did not offer contact information for legislators online (83.9 percent, *(SE(p) = .023*). Rarely did these non–profit organizations post protest or rally information on their Web site (10.3 percent, *(SE (p) = .023*) or conduct targeted e–mail campaigns to inform policy–makers (13.5 percent, *(SE (p) = .031*). Yet, only 9.5 percent *(SE(p) = .112)* of Internet content creators said that the Internet was not very effective or was ineffective as a tool for activism and only 12.4 percent *(SE(p) = .091)* of respondents reported that the Internet was not very effective or ineffective as a tool for communication with members.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, a large 78 percent *(SE(p) = .070)* of those otherwise associated with the non–profit said that they almost never or never have attended a protest or rally because of information learned through the Internet. Almost half of those otherwise associated with the non–profit (44.8 percent *(SE(p) = .073*) said that they had almost never or never changed their behavior because of information learned through the Internet. A majority of those otherwise associated with the non–profit (52.8 percent *(SE(p) = .085*) reported that they had almost never or never met other members from their non–profit organization because of information learned through the Internet. A slightly larger 55.2 percent *(SE(p) = .085)* said that they had almost never or never met people from outside their non–profit organization because of information learned through the Internet. However, most of those otherwise associated with the non–profit (67.9 percent) thought that their non–profits' site was very useful or quite useful.

According to Internet content creators, roughly half (50.3 percent, *(SE(p) = .030*) did not post their latest newsletter on their Web site and even more (60.4 percent, *(SE(p) = .030*) did not post their previous newsletters on their Web site. The majority of organizations (59.9 percent, *(SE(p) = .027)* did not post employment opportunities online. However, 58.7 percent *(SE(p) = .027)* did post volunteer opportunities on their e–mail lists. Fifty–one percent *(SE(p) = .101)* of Internet content creators felt that the Internet was very effective, effective, or somewhat effective for recruitment.

Hypothesis 3, which stated that Internet content creators for non–profit organizations will report high levels of information on their own non–profit organizations' Web site, was not supported.

Hypothesis 4

Significant relationships were found between respondents and the perceived impact of the Internet on social change (ρ = .000, φ = .598); the relationship between the Internet and interaction with government (ρ = .009, φ = .421); the relationship between the Internet and increased political power (ρ = .011, φ = .401); and the perception of the Internet as a democratic tool (ρ = .000, φ = .612). Adjusted residuals showed that Internet content creators were much more likely to strongly agree that the use of the Internet has a strong impact on social change (4.0); leads to moderately increased interaction with government (3.1); results in greatly increased political power (2.7), and is a powerful tool for democracy (6.9). Those otherwise associated with non–profits believed that the Internet encouraged these social impacts much less than would be expected by chance alone.

Hypothesis 4, which stated that Internet content creators for non–profit organizations will be stronger proponents of the Internet's democratic capabilities than those otherwise associated with the non–profit (as evidenced by perceived impact on social change, interaction with government, political power and democracy), was supported.

Hypothesis 5

There was a significant relationship between the type of respondent (technological decision–maker vs. those otherwise associated with the non–profit) and the perceived impact of the Internet on the organizations' visibility (ρ = .000) and their organizations' credibility (ρ = .019). Of those organizations that had a Web site, 85.8 percent *(SE(p) = .025)* of Internet content creators believed that it has increased their organizations visibility and 75.1 percent *(SE(p) = .035)* thought it increased their credibility. One would expect those otherwise associated with the non–profit to state that the Internet has increased their non–profit organizations' visibility (-4.3) and credibility (-2.5) more than they did while Internet content creators believed the Internet has increased the non–profit organizations' visibility (2.1) and credibility (2.5) more often than would be expected by chance alone.

There was also a significant relationship between the type of respondent (technological decision–maker vs. those otherwise associated with the non–profit) and the belief that those who do not have a Web site are at a disadvantage (ρ = .000). A full 89 percent *(SE(p) = .025)* of non–profit Internet content creators felt that organizations that do not have a Web site are at a disadvantage. In examining the adjusted residuals, it became apparent that Internet content creators believe that those who do not have a Web site are at a disadvantage (4.0) more often than would be expected by chance alone. Thus, Hypothesis 5, which stated that Internet content creators for non–profit organizations will be stronger proponents of the Internet's benefits than those otherwise associated with the non–profit, was supported.

Hypothesis 6

Internet content creators were asked if they used e–mail lists for their non–profit organization

and those otherwise associated with the non–profit were asked if they participated in e–mail lists. A significant Pearson chi–square relationship was found between the respondent and e–mail list usage (ρ = .008). While this relationship was found to be significant, over 20 percent of expected values were less than five — a key barometer to measure strength in associations (SPSS, 1999). Adjusted residuals showed weak strength in the relationship (+/- 1.2) and the phi coefficient (φ = .131) appeared to invalidate the found association in the larger population.

However, the relationship between respondent and the perceived benefit of e–mail lists was also found to be significant (ρ = .000) with additional measures of association validating that significance (φ = .631). Adjusted residuals showed that Internet content creators believed e–mail lists provide a service (4.0) more often than would be expected by chance alone while one would expect those otherwise associated with the non–profit to state that e–mail lists provide a service (-4.0) more than they did. Indeed, the near totality of Internet content creators (93.9 percent, *(SE(p) = .030*), believed that this technology did provide a service.

Interestingly, only 54 percent *(SE(p) = .039)* of organizations that used e–mail lists allowed members to subscribe to these e–mail lists online. The remaining 46 percent of those who used e–mail lists asked users to subscribe to the list through the telephone or postal service. Reasons that Internet content creators did not use e–mail lists were split relatively evenly: 24.4 percent *(SE(p) = .099)* of this group thought they did not have enough members to justify the list and 22 percent said they didn't have enough time to create an e–mail list. Sixteen percent of Internet content creators didn't know how to manage an e–mail list and another 22 percent didn't think their organization needed one. Of those otherwise associated with the non–profit who didn't subscribe to e–mail lists, 30.4 percent *(SE(p) = .121)* said it was because their non–profit organization didn't offer it.

Almost all organizations did post their e–mail address on their Web site or on their printed materials (93 percent, *(SE(p) = .013*) as well as additional contact information (90.9 percent, *(SE(p) = .015*).

A significant Pearson chi–square relationship was found between the respondent and newsgroup usage (ρ = .000). Adjusted residuals showed that those otherwise associated with the non–profit use news groups (6.2) more often than would be expected by chance alone while one would expect Internet content creators to use newsgroups more than they did. Only 19.1 percent *(SE(p) = .025)* of Internet content creators reported that their organization used newsgroups. Of those who didn't use newsgroups for their organization, most (31.8 percent *(SE(p) = .104*) didn't believed they needed one.

The relationship between respondent and the perceived benefit of newsgroups was found to be significant as well (ρ = .000). Only 18.4 percent of Internet content creators believed that newsgroups provided a service. A higher, 47.8 percent *(SE(p) = .057)* of those otherwise associated with the non–profits found the technology beneficial. Adjusted residuals showed that those otherwise associated with the non–profit found newsgroups beneficial (5.6) more often than would be expected by chance alone while one would expect Internet content creators to find newsgroups more beneficial than they did (-5.6).

Of the those otherwise associated with the non–profit who didn't subscribe to newsgroups, 45 percent *(SE(p) = .130)* said it was because they didn't like junk mail, 26.3 percent claimed their organization didn't offer it and 18.2 percent didn't know what it was.

There was not a strongly significant relationship between Internet content creators offering chatrooms and those otherwise associated with the non–profits using chat rooms (ρ = .037, φ = .111, +/-1.7), A very small 6.8 percent *(SE(p) = .022)* of Internet content creators said that their organization provided chat rooms and a relatively small 10.4 percent of those otherwise associated with the non–profit said that they used chatrooms.

However, there was a significant relationship (ρ = .000) between the respondent and the

belief that chatrooms were useful. Those otherwise associated with the non–profit were more likely to believe chatrooms were not useful (2.6), while Internet content creators thought chatrooms were not useful more often than one would expect (-2.6). This finding contrasts against the majority of Internet content creators (65 percent *(SE(p) = .020)* reporting an average of 1–5 chat room experiences per week.

There was a significant relationship between Internet content creators offering petitions online to sign and those otherwise associated with the non–profits signing non–profit petitions ($\rho = .000$, $\varphi = .605$). According to Internet content creators surveyed for this research, an almost totality of organizations did not offer petitions online for members to sign (93.7 percent, *(SE(p) = .017*) even though 52.1 percent of those otherwise associated with the non–profit reported signing petitions online. There was not a significant relationship between respondent and perception that online petitions were useful ($\rho = .057$, $\varphi = .105$) When asked whether signing petitions online is an effective method of input for social change, those otherwise associated with the non–profit were decidedly mixed. Almost 24 percent *(SE(p) = .098)* thought it was very effective or effective and 28.5 percent believed that it was not very effective or ineffective. A large 24.7 percent didn't know if it was effective or ineffective for social change.

Thus, Hypothesis 6, which stated that Internet content creators for non–profit organizations will use Internet for interconnectedness more than those otherwise associated with the non–profit (as evidenced by use and perceived benefits of e–mail lists, newsgroups, chatrooms and online petitions) was only partially supported.

Discussion and conclusions

Most of the non–profits surveyed for this research were from small 501(c)(3) organizations with budgets under US$1 million. All of those surveyed were listed in Guidestar, which is not an exhaustive listing of all non–profits in the United States. This clearly restricts any generalizability of these finding to all non–profits. However, of those surveyed, ninety percent of the organizations reported having a Web site presence. This is up five percent from research conducted only a few years earlier (Burt and Taylor, 2001). Not only do non–profits and those otherwise associated with the non–profits attend to the Internet, they are very active users. Almost all respondents said that they constantly or very often use both the Internet generally and e–mail specifically. This suggests a high level of knowledge about the Internet and relative prowess in engaging Internet content. It could be assumed from their high usage patterns that users have had plenty of time to access a variety of Web content and different approaches to presenting information.

Previous research has suggested that the Internet has principally become a tool for promoting an organization's cause (Atton, 2004). This did not bear out in this research. Only one–fifth of Internet content creators reported using the Internet for the stated reason of promotion. Instead, non–profit content creators reported that the Internet was a tool for education, but not specifically for promotion. This suggests that these non–profits are not viewing the Internet in terms of an economically–based marketing exchange, but, rather a tool for information. Paradoxically, only a small percentage of those otherwise associated with the non–profit reported learning about their non–profit organization's work through the Internet. This suggests the importance of the Internet in creating an interconnected and informative democratic sphere may not yet be realized by those who actually use the Internet — at least not in terms of recruiting or enticing individuals to become involved in a non–profit organization.

Interestingly, only a very small percentage of Internet content creators for non–profit organizations felt that reaching donors was a central reason for their organization to be on the Internet. This finding is related to content creators' lack of connection with online promotion as well. Indeed, almost all respondents of this survey reported using the Internet to research potential funding sources but only half had the capacity for individuals to donate online and even less felt that the Internet was an effective tool for fund–raising. This appears surprisingly small, given that in 1999, the estimated volume of fund–raising achieved over the Internet was 24 percent of non–profit funding (Stewart, 1999). Only four years later, Internet fund–raising increased to 48 percent of total funds raised in the non–profit sector (Wallace, 2004). Perhaps those who initially flocked to the Internet found that the medium was not as fruitful for raising monetary funds or it could be that the majority of non–profits who are using the Internet for fund–raising are those with larger budgets — a group that was not heavily represented in this sample.

Thus, the Internet appeared to be primarily a tool for gathering and providing information for non–profit organizations, rather than contact with members, fund–raising or promotion. This runs counter to much earlier research espousing limitless potential for connectivity. This research found that any promise of an interconnected and informative sphere of online communication did not manifest itself in practice. There was little evidence of online communication between the non–profit and those associated with it and many of these same individuals revealed a preference for telephone contact. This may suggest that individuals are seeking more personalized means of communication.

There was evidence of basic information for online communication in that almost all of the organizations surveyed did direct readers of printed materials to their Web site and vice versa, suggesting some level of synergy between media. That same synergy, however, did not seem to extend to those otherwise associated with the non–profit. Sixty percent of those associated with the non–profit that had Web sites themselves did not have links to the organization on their own personal Web site. Without asking these respondents why they did not link to their non–profit organization, this finding does seem to suggest that these individuals did not place any value on connecting to their non–profit organization. However, this interconnectedness is a key component to a thriving democratic sphere (Tarrow, 1998).

Further, if the primary stated reason for the use of the Internet was information gathering and research, it was surprising that only a small percentage of those otherwise associated with the non–profit reported visiting Web sites that opposed or even supported their cause. Only a very small fraction of this group first heard about their own non–profit online and most thought that online information was not very reliable. This is in stark contrast with those who were responsible for technological decision–making. This group was much more likely to believe the Internet was an effective tool for staying informed and they actually used the Internet to visit supporting and opposing Web sites. While this association does not prove causality, it may suggest that there is a disconnect between those who create the content for democratic ideals and others who may find these goals to be utopian.

This utopian vision held firm even in cases where the technology was not even used. In the case of e–mail listings, chatrooms and online petitions, Internet content creators still believed strongly in the benefits of these technologies — much more so than the those otherwise associated with the non–profit who used (or, in most cases, did not use) them. Paradoxically, almost all organizations also didn't use newsgroups, and of those who did, most reported only 1–5 messages per week. But, here, it was the those otherwise associated with the non–profit who believed newsgroups had value. This finding suggests that the non–participation in newsgroups by non–profit organizations may be an opportunity missed, given that those otherwise associated with the non–profit did not find as much benefit in e–mail lists online petitions or chatrooms. Given that many within the world of technology find newsgroups to be outmoded or obsolete, this finding suggests an interesting divide between what organizations are using — or not using — on their Web sites and what users actually want.

While those responsible for creating content online were more likely to conduct research and use the Internet for information, they were not very adept at providing their own information through their own organizations' Web site. The overwhelming majority of non–profits didn't offer basic information to members, such as contact information for legislators, past and current newsletters, employment opportunities or protest rally information. An argument could be made that these factors may not be relevant or appropriate for some non–profits but this finding co–existed with the fact that the near totality of Internet content creators felt strongly that the Internet was an effective tool for activism and democracy; allowed for communication with members; made their organization more visible and credible and left those without a Web site at a decided disadvantage.

Perhaps not coincidentally, those otherwise associated with the non–profit were far less likely to see the Internet as a credible tool for activism and democracy. Most activists reported having not attended protest rallies because of information learned online; rarely or never donating to a non–profit organization online or signing an online petition; and never meeting people from outside their non–profit organization because of information learned on the Internet. However, these individuals reported that the primary reason for using their non–profit organizations' Web page was to stay informed and the majority of these people felt that the Internet was a very effective means for this purpose.

These findings clearly point to a disconnect — not only between the Internet content creators and the those otherwise associated with the non–profit, but particularly within the Internet content creators themselves. In ten out of eleven relationships measuring beliefs and perceptions of the Internet's power, Internet content creators were more likely than those otherwise associated with the non–profit to believe in various benefits of the Internet (see Table 1). However, this group did very little to use the Internet on their own Web site in ways that would promote these beliefs. Clearly, the idealized vision of a democratic sphere on the Internet continues to have salience with those creating content, but these findings could be a foreshadowing of future areas of frustration within the online non–profit sector.

This research suggests that those responsible for technological decision–making in non–profits must clearly define their purpose and goals for having a Web presence and subsequently examine whether the functionality of their Web site meets that stated purpose. It appears that Internet content creators for non–profit organizations, like most academicians examining the Internet, believe in the democratic potentials and benefits of the Internet. However, these same content creators have done very little to use the Internet on their own non–profit Web site in ways that would promote these beliefs. This paradox could be a clear foreshadowing of future areas of frustration within the online non–profit sector and must be addressed. This disconnect is likely due to a fear of the technology; perceived costs of time and money; and possibly apathy.

Certainly, there may be financial restraints that do not allow a technological decision–maker to implement certain Web technologies. However, the majority of functions that were argued by these content creators to be beneficial, democratic tools for communication are not expensive to implement. E–mail lists, newsgroups, chatrooms and online petitions do not take a preponderance of time or money to set up with the plummeting price of computer software and hardware. It could be argued that such interactive endeavors may require more time on the part of the non–profit, but given the fact that this survey found 76 percent of Internet content creators reported using the Internet constantly or very often at work, it seems entirely feasible that monitoring such interactive technologies could be woven into the workday.

Perhaps another reason for the non–implementation of democratic, interactive technologies is a fear of the technology itself. This may be due to the inherent technological ambiguity (Flanagin, 2000) involved in most new innovations. These fears could be overcome with short, informational courses. These courses are often sponsored by state and local governments and may need to be promoted with more aggressiveness within the non–profit sector.

The problem of apathy is a much more vexing problem to solve given the fact that Internet content creators appeared to have such strong beliefs about the power of the technology. However, as is the case with so many issues, individuals and organizations do not always act in their best interest. It is suggested that the only way to turn the beliefs of non–profit organizations into democratic action is through robust relationships between government and the non–profit sector. These relationships must emphasize all three potential barriers to technological change that have been listed here in the hopes that non–profits will be spurred into action.

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Notes

1. McChesney, 2000, p. 5.

2. Scott and Street, 2000, p. 234.

3. Gitlin, 1980, p. 3.

4. Barker–Plummer, 1995, p. 306.

5. Barker–Plummer, 1995, p. 307.

6. Atton, 2004, p. 39.

7. Civille, 1997, p. Introduction.

8. Dertouzos, 1991, p. 75.

9. Rheingold, 1993, p. 46.

10. Poster, 1997, p. 209.

11. Spencer, 2002, p. Advocacy.

12. Stewart, 1999, p. Introduction.

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