

## An Examination of the Literature on Civil Society Organisations and the Internet Artefact

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This paper reviews the literature on civil society organizations (CSOs) and the Internet artefact. There is much agreement and some (recent) dissent within the literature about the importance of the Internet artefact to and within CSOs. Much of the research has an undisclosed institutionalist framework which normalises the presence of the Internet artefact in the workings of CSOs without examining the process of institutionalisation. There is a slant to the ideological left in most research on CSOs and the Internet, and a number of authors employ the same examples in their arguments. This review examines these issues and offers suggestions for further research to address the institutionalisation of the Internet artefact in civil society organisations.

### Introduction

One application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is within civil society organizations (CSOs). This essay reviews the available literature on the Internet artefact and CSOs, and puts this research in context, examining its ontological assumptions. The literature demonstrates an ongoing debate about how Internet artefacts can be used by CSOs. The authors ask *how* CSOs should adopt the Internet, but they do not question *if* they will adopt it. Thus, most authors agree with and contribute, albeit unconsciously, to the institutionalisation of the Internet artefact within CSOs.

Although some of the newer literature draws on critical theory to examine the Internet artefact and CSOs, there is an “administrative” viewpoint pervading many of the works (for an explanation of critical vs. administrative research, see Lazarsfeld, 1944). The authors Cleaver (1998) and Whaley (2000) examine how CSOs can effectively adopt Internet artefacts to advance their missions (by increasing membership, engaging members in action, etc.). While this will likely be appreciated by those working for CSOs, there is a need to examine more critically this underlying institutionalisation of the Internet artefact, and the impact this normalised view has on further critical research. Do we assume, as Moore (1999, p. 41) does, that “the power of the Internet for real-world group organization has been tested and proven,” or do we take a broader view that activism “will not be extended merely through the diffusion of a new technological artefact” (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 630)? The authors make ontological assumptions: how the Internet artefact should be adopted is in question in the literature; the adoption (institutionalisation) of the Internet artefact is not. Only a small fraction of the more recent literature identifies this embedded institutionalist viewpoint; the authors largely fail to acknowledge their part in the institutionalisation of the Internet in CSOs.

### Definitions

This review uses Garrido & Halavais’s definition of a CSO as an “activist NGO” with a “particular social mission” that is “non-commercial”, “non-governmental” and “specifically engaging in activism” (Garrido & Halavais, 2003, p. 174). Likewise, this essay draws on Avgerou’s (2002) concept of institutionalism as a normative process through which ICT artefacts become accepted as fixtures in organisations.

There is a lack of consensus on what constitutes the Internet artefact. Many older works (Pal, 1998; Diani, 2000) focus heavily on Usenet, listservs or bulletin boards (through which users can post comments on a website or email list for others to read), while a small number of more recent works (Clark & Themudo, 2003; Chadwick, 2006) focus on the Internet or online communities as the important Internet artefact. This review includes the range of Internet-enabled ICT artefacts (email, listservs, online communities, websites, etc.) discussed in the literature.

### Organizing Vision

The literature demonstrates the emergence of an organizing vision: a “focal community idea for the application of information technology in organizations” (Swanson & Ramiller, 1997, p. 460) of CSOs and the Internet. By framing this debate in certain ways, the authors are not only engaging in the debate; they are shaping it. Diani (2002) argues for a technologically determinist point of view, noting the Internet “improves the effectiveness of communication dramatically, and in doing so it often makes the very existence of these [activist] networks possible” (p. 395). Clark (2003) notes that the Internet enables activism across national borders, giving rise to “virtual CSOs” and “dotcauses”, thus arguing that the Internet changes the nature of activism (p. 2-3). The “grandfather” of the virtual community, Rheingold (2002), posits that new kinds of political organizing are not possible without Internet-enabled technology.

The most vocal proponent of the benefits of the Internet artefact for CSOs is Cleaver (1998) who argues that Internet-enabled communication was behind much of the success of the Zapatista movement in Mexico. He argues that this success made other CSOs examine the ways they could use the Internet and ICTs to reach organizational goals. He further argues that the Internet is changing the ways in which CSOs are structured and the scope of their efforts, thereby changing the world order through Internet-enabled CSO action. However, he may be neglecting other factors which could also be influencing the success of CSO movements.

Interestingly, Ward (2005) embodies rather than identifies the underlying acceptance of technology as an autonomous player in this debate. In his study of political youth websites, he discusses how website users can sign up to “receive email from the website” (ibid, p. 242) rather than from *the CSO*

*running the website*. The important player becomes not the CSO (run by real people) but the technology itself. Thus, the Internet artefact creeps into the very conceptualization of who/what is in charge; it becomes not just a representation of the institution, but the institution itself, perhaps without our critical examination or consent.

Meanwhile, Pal (1998) notes that the key differences in discussions about the Internet and CSOs are questions about "the degree to which ICT" can make the CSO successful (Pal, 1998, p. 108). Pal examines *how* the Internet artefact may be used to help CSOs, but he is not critically examining the normalisation of the use of ICTs for activism. While Doctor & Dutton (1999) argue that there is "little empirical research" to support or refute claims of effectiveness of the Internet in the work of CSOs, they too adopt a normative view of the artefact: "technology can be viewed as being just as important to the social structure as laws, economic institutions or social beliefs" (Doctor & Dutton, 1999, p. 224). Rheingold (2002) questions CSOs' "uncritical embrace" of technology, calling for "an informed consideration of what we are getting ourselves into" (p. xviii). However, while he asks how CSOs should use the Internet, he reinforces the conclusion that CSOs must "get ourselves into" (institutionalise) Internet artefacts. These authors support the implicit organizing vision in which the incorporation of ICTs into CSO is inevitable.

In contrast, a few authors do problematise this technological determinism. Wilhelm (1999) notes that the "causal story of ubiquitous access to technology leading to an expanded interest in political matters...is accepted, almost with blind faith, although there is scant empirical evidence" to back this up (Wilhelm, 1999, p. 157). Whaley (2000) notes that Internet artefacts do not create successful activism or social justice of their own accord; they are not imbued with democracy. Coleman (1999) echoes this, noting specifically that there is a "technological determinism" behind the idea that Internet artefacts "possess inherently dialogical, democratic and libertarian characteristics" (p. 197). Chadwick (2006) is the most explicit in addressing these larger questions of institutionalisation, arguing that ultimately society chooses and designs tools that carry or shape social meanings.

### Examples

Specific theories provide examples of the technologically driven and institutionalised nature of the debate about CSOs and the Internet artefact. The resource-based view (RBV), which examines the Internet artefact as a tool or asset of the CSO, is employed in a number of sources. Cleaver (1998) focuses on the importance of the speed and constant availability of the Internet in fact-checking information. Dahlberg (2001) notes that CSOs must "compete" with corporate "activist" websites which are also using Internet-enabled tools (Dahlberg, 2001) to attract users. Whaley (2002), from an administrative perspective, focuses on the Internet artefact as a tool, arguing that CSOs need to determine their organizational strategies first and adapt internet strategy around these strategies. Clark & Themudo (2003) discuss the importance of Internet communication in reducing costs, hinting at transaction cost theory.

In a more critical vein, Silver (2003) notes that previous research has focused "more on what politicians and political parties on doing *with the Net* and less on what citizens and

activists are doing *on the Net*" (Silver, 2003, p. 280 - original emphasis). This view, paired with Chadwick's, could break the institutionalist domination by viewing the Internet as a *space* rather than as a *tool*. However, the idea is not developed further. McCaughey & Ayers (2003) problematise the RBV by asking if the Internet is "for protest" or merely to "support protest"; in other words, is the Internet artefact an actor in itself (hinting at actor-network theory), or just a tool (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003)? In turn, Paragas (2003) asks if political movements use technology or are shaped by technology: "Mobile communications technologies and democracy perhaps reflexively define each other" (p. 259). (While Paragas (2003) is not talking about the Internet artefact per se, his comments are relevant as mobile communications are only possible because of other, Internet-enabled technical artefacts, and the dispersed and user-driven nature of mobile phone technology is mirrored in Internet artefacts such as email, IM and blogs. The lines between mobile and Internet artefacts, especially in regards to activism, are becoming increasingly blurred. The IS field would benefit from additional research on technological convergence as it relates to technology adoption in CSOs.)

Much of the newer research addresses the idea of "hacktivism" or "netwar" – direct activism which only exists inside the Internet. Cleaver (1991) defines hacktivism as "the use of modern computer technologies as weapons of criminal acts or political struggle" (p. 1). While Pal (1998) touches on this idea, it is only in more recent years that the idea of "hacktivism" has been extensively discussed in the literature by Rheingold (2002), Clark & Themudo (2003), Vegh (2003), and Chadwick (2006) among others. This is an example of how the research is evolving through time, focusing first on the ideas that the Internet artefact was going to change CSOs: "The rise in the visibility and density of these transnational social movements cannot be divorced from the communications technologies that have empowered them," (Deibert, 1998, p. 33), to a more critical approach of how the Internet artefact is both shaping and being shaped through its employment by CSOs. Garrido & Halavais (2003) discuss this through the example of the Zapatista movement, noting that the movement benefited from its use of Internet artefacts, but also that the movement served as a central organizing "node" for other activist networks, thus serving the network (the Internet artefact) as well (Garrido & Halavais, 2003). This moves the literature towards a more nuanced examination of the Internet artefact and CSOs, but it does not fully counteract the entrenched institutionalist viewpoint.

### Recurring Themes

While the research is growing more critical through time, it would benefit from new examples and conceptualisations. Much of the research uses the same examples as the basis for examination; the repeated use of these examples limits and reinforces the dominant (technologically deterministic) viewpoint in the literature. Four of the sources deal heavily or exclusively with the Zapatista Movement (Cleaver, 1998; Clark & Themudo, 2003; Garrido & Halavais, 2003; Chadwick, 2006). Three of the examples use the overthrow of President Estrada in the Philippines as the basis for their discussion or as prominent examples (Rheingold, 2002; Paragas, 2003; Chadwick, 2006), and three sources discuss the WTO "Battle for Seattle" (Rheingold, 2002; Clark & Themudo, 2003; Chadwick, 2006). These examples highlight the bene-

fits of the Internet to CSOs; they reinforce the idea that CSOs must adopt Internet artefacts to be successful. These examples persist through time, despite the availability of newer, perhaps more relevant, examples, which might provide alternative conceptualisations of the Internet and CSOs.

Hanafi (2005), Ward (2005), and Chadwick (2006) offer a few of these newer examples. Hanafi (2005) profiles the Palestinian Scientist and Technologists Abroad (PALESTA) discussion list. Ward (2005) analyses a number of political activist youth organisations in the UK and Ireland during the 2004 European Parliament elections, and Chadwick (2006) includes examples from the Howard Dean presidential campaign in the United States in 2004, as well as MoveOn.org and the Cult of the Dead Cow. These new examples show an evolution, offering the ability to examine new applications of the Internet in CSOs, and also to see how, with the evolution of the Internet, the relationship between the Internet artefact and CSOs grows more interdependent and complex (Chadwick, 2006).

It is important to note the ideological bias of much of the research. There is a slant to the ideological left in the examination of the employment of the Internet artefact for "positive" action by progressive social movements, or "negative action" by "terrorist" or "right-wing" movements. Rheingold (2002) notes the potential for technology to be used for ill purposes, but does not examine his own bias toward which groups are "good" or "bad." He neglects to see how one person's terrorist group may be another's freedom fighter. A critical examination could lead to a more nuanced view of the employment of the Internet in all types of CSO movements. Silver (2003) recognizes this bias, arguing that there is too much focus on "cyberactivism of the left" and that there should be further examination of how CSOs on the right are harnessing Internet artefacts (p. 290).

A few sources examine embedded "western" cultural values of the Internet artefact in their discussions of the Internet and CSOs. Clark & Themudo (2003) discuss western cultural dominance and issues of the "digital divide" in the use of the Internet artefact, but they again simply accept that "dot causes" help to "democratize" activist movements (Clark & Themudo, 2003, p. 120). Salter (2003) also notes that the structure of the Internet is created from a western hegemony and may therefore be exclusionary to non-western audiences. Lebert (2003) goes so far as to argue that, "others will not necessarily welcome the values expressed on the Web – a medium that remains profoundly Americanized" (Lebert, 2003, p. 224). Despite their identification of these issues, these authors see the introduction of the Internet artefact as a necessary part of CSO development. They do not problematise the idea of a "digital divide", or examine whether non-western CSOs need to employ the Internet artefact to be successful. The institutionalist assumption is that CSOs must employ the Internet. The authors unconsciously narrow their focus to examine ways to counteract a bias they see as a negative by-product of the advantages of the Internet artefact, but they do not question the existence of these biases or the propagation of the Internet artefact itself.

### Conclusions, Limitations and Further Research

As Silver (2003) argues, the Internet is "a historical construction" (Silver, 2003, p. 283), and it will evolve in the coming years. Research on CSOs and the Internet artefact must

evolve with it. Much of the research on the Internet and CSOs has an undisclosed institutionalist bias. Although the authors claim a neutral viewpoint, their arguments reinforce the idea that Internet technology is necessary to the success of CSOs, or at least that it must be considered as a tool. The research largely focuses on how the Internet artefact can be employed by CSOs, and on whether the Internet has a positive or negative effect on CSOs (and vice versa). The ideas that (1) the Internet artefact shapes CSOs and (2) the inevitability that CSOs will employ the Internet artefact are not generally in question in the literature. Rheingold (2002), Chadwick (2006), and McCaughey & Ayers (2003), among others, dissect the Internet artefact in minute detail, but assume that the institutionalisation of the Internet artefact is inevitable. There are a few exceptions to this view. Whaley (2000), for example, notes that CSOs should focus on "building new kinds of international thematic teams through the Net without letting it [the Internet artefact] dictate....organisational strategies" (p. 40). As Silver (2003) notes, "scholars' framing of these movements will impact the movements" (p. 288). These authors challenge the assumptions outlined above, but their voices are outnumbered by those writing from a technologically deterministic point of view. For the research on CSOs and the Internet to evolve productively, more research is needed to explicitly address this normative issue and to examine how and why ICTs become institutionalised in CSOs.

The IS field would benefit from broader research on the Internet artefact and social CSOs, such as Amnesty International or Oxfam, rather than its current focus on political CSOs. There is also a lack of published research on CSOs and newer technology, such as online communities. Instead, much of the literature focuses on listservs or other older technologies. Lastly, the field would benefit from broader research that includes multiplicities of actors with varied (non-economic) goals. If, as Salter (2003) argues, "the Internet can be seen as a foundational medium for civil society," (Salter, 2003, p. 129), then we need to better understand the complex interaction between civil society (CSOs) and the Internet.

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