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Advocacy Organizations: Implications for Global Social Justice**

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**Social Networking Choices and Environmental Advocacy Organizations: Implications
for Global Social Justice**

Nonprofit Advocacy is one of the central ways that the nonprofit sector promotes global social justice (Salamon, 1994; Berry & Arons, 2002). Nonprofit Governmental Organizations (NGOs) advocate for human rights, fair trade; protection of children and prevention of environmental destruction and other worthy causes. In recent years, the way that this advocacy is conducted has been the subject of scholarly scrutiny. One strand of this research looks at how the professionalization of politics has affected nonprofit advocacy organizations. This research differentiates old line advocates from newer public interest advocates, often arguing that the latter do little to develop civic skills and social capital (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2003). At the same time, the infusion of technology in the advocacy process is another critical dimension of inquiry (McNutt & Boland, 1999; Hick & McNutt, 2002; Brainard & Siplon, 2004; Cornfield, 2004), especially at the point where technology strategy raises important questions about issues such as participation, social capital and networking. This research aims at issues that are at the nexus of these two research streams. One of the more recent developments in technology is the advent of Web 2.0, the participatory web or the read-write web (Addison, 2006; Bryant, 2006; Germany, 2006). This new set of technologies, which includes Blogs, Wikis, Social Networking sites (like Facebook and MySpace), tagging and others, is designed to facilitate user generated content and interactivity. This type of technology means that participation is almost guaranteed. The Dean Campaign in the 2004 Democratic Primary made good use of this technology

revolution and applied it to politics (Trippi, 2004). The Dean Campaign used Meetup (www.meetup.com), an on-line system designed to make possible face to face meetings, a Blog (www.blogforamerica.org) and other related Web 2.0 technologies in addition to more conventional Internet-based political technology. While Dean lost the democratic primary, the use of these new technologies became institutionalized in American politics.

The nexus between these two themes is potentially problematic. The newer public interest advocacy groups might prefer older technologies that would allow them to control the message, while older, membership based groups would prefer what the user involvement aspects of new technology had to offer. Naturally, organizational factors such as size and resources will play a role. In order to examine these issues, we advance the following research questions:

- 1) Is there a difference between traditional membership and public interest organizations in the adoption of web 2.0 technology?
- 2) Is this effect, if any, moderated by organizational factors?

This research is significant because it looks at an important theoretical question from a new vantage point. In addition, it will add to our understanding of the role of technology in nonprofit advocacy. This is technology that supports network development, social capital and other forces that are important to nonprofit theory. Their application to nonprofit activities is, therefore, of both practical and theoretical consequence.

Review of the Literature

Three streams of literature inform this research. First, there is the research on the professionalization of nonprofit advocacy. Second, there is the literature on technology adoption and Third, the literature on Web 2.0. Each of these will be considered in turn.

The Changing Nature of Advocacy in the Nonprofit Sector: One of the major controversies in nonprofit advocacy is the change from member based advocacy organizations to professionally managed public interest advocacy groups. This change occurred in the late 1960s and the 1970s and created advocacy organizations that represented the public interest instead of the issues that were favored by members. Berry (1999) applauds this development, arguing that such groups are much more likely to fight for issues that are unpopular. These include environmental issues, human rights issues and consumer rights issues. He refers to these as “post material” issues and identifies the organizations that promote them as public interest groups. One of these post material issues is the protection of the environment.

This trend in advocacy group behavior parallels a trend in electoral politics to more professionalized campaigning. At one time, political campaigns ran on volunteer efforts. The use of consultants and other campaign professionals has pushed campaign volunteers out of many areas, particularly those that involve strategy and message. Among the similarities are decision making by professional staff and a strong interest in message control. There is also an inclination to use direct mail fundraising, mass media ads and market research.

Berry's (1999, 1977) contention is that these post material issues would never receive attention from the traditional advocacy groups. This is largely because decision making is in the hands of the members, who might be too conservative or disinterested to approve spending organizational resources to explore these issues. The public interest organizational form can avoid this constraint.

Not everyone agrees with Berry's rosy assessment of the public interest movement. Putnam (2000) attacks this approach as destructive of social capital. He argues that associational life is where people learn how to participate in government. They learn to study issues, hold meetings, communicate and so forth. The new style organizations allow people to become checkbook activists, leaving political work to the professionals. This may result in superior outcomes, but does not allow for the opportunity to develop the capacity to become involved in politics.

Skocpol (2003) comes to a similar conclusion based on her review of the historical evidence. She also concludes that this trend is dangerous and destructive to the political system and to social capital.

Verba, Schlozman & Brady (1995) have identified the development of civic skills as an important ingredient of political engagement in their influential community voluntarism model of public participation. Civic skills are needed to participate in the political process. The implication is that if the opportunity to develop those experiences is not afforded to citizens, they may be blocked out of the political process.

This debate was again brought to scholarly attention last year with the publication of Dana Fisher's (2007) *Activism, Inc.* Fisher studied an organization that

provided canvassers for progressive organizations. She concluded that the workers, idealistic young people who wanted to work for social change, were being recruited to canvassing jobs with little or no input to the decision making or chance for advancement to a leadership position. This suggests that the professionalization of advocacy work, in this regard, can make the development of civic skills and the development of new leadership unlikely.

It should also be noted that the presence of members does not mean that those members actually participate in the organization's leadership. It might be considered part of fundraising or a way to benefit from the tax law treatment of members (versus the general public) with regards to advocacy expenditures (McNutt, 2007). The simple fact of having members does not mean that they participate in any meaningful way, have the opportunity to develop civic skills and participate in forming the agenda.

The argument about the role of members and professionalization in nonprofit advocacy has been a long and contentious debate in nonprofit circles. The choice of strategy is important, however, and new technologies make those choices more difficult to deal with because they offer new and often contradictory options.

Nonprofit Advocacy and Technology: The introduction of technology to the practice of advocacy has progressed since the early 1990s from a curiosity to an expected part of nonprofit advocacy (See McNutt & Boland 1999; Hick & McNutt, 2002). Internet based technology has the advantage of interactivity. Often called "New Media" because it turns the one way conversation of traditional print and wired media (often preferred by public interest groups) into a two way conversation. The wired advocacy techniques

vary in their ability to make interactivity happen. Many of the earlier techniques (such as brochure-like webpages frequently referred to as “Brochureware”) were not much of an improvement over mass media. Newer technologies make interactivity easier and support a new wrinkle, user generated content. Blogs, Wikis, Image and Video Sharing Sites (like Flickr and YouTube) all allow users to create their own content and post it on the Internet. This capacity can be restricted, but it opens up a range of new technologically enhanced interaction opportunities. This set of technologies is collectively referred to as Web 2.0.

Web 2.0 is a general term used to refer to a variety of web-based technologies that allow for interactivity, user participation and user generated content (McNutt, In Press; Madden & Fox, 2006). These technologies have made possible exciting developments in education, library science, disaster services and a host of other areas.

The major technologies that are part of the Web 2.0 constellation are:

- **Blogging:** Blogs are on-line journals that consist of a series of entries or posts. Most blogs allow users to comment on the posting. Bloggers also frequently comment of each other’s posts. Video blogs (called V-Blogs) are also possible.
- **Wikis:** A wiki is an online site that can be edited by users. Wikis facilitate collaboration and sharing of ideas.
- **Social Bookmarking Sites:** Social bookmarking sites collect information about what people who join the site are bookmarking which facilitates the search for information.

- **Social Networking Sites:** These are sites designed to help people network and connect. These sites combine a webpage with a social networking capacity.
- **RSS: Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication:** RSS is a system that allows users to subscribe to a website, a Blog or some other resource.
- **Podcasting:** Podcasting involves creation of an audio file of a presentation and making it accessible for download on the web.
- **Image and Videosharing:** These are sites that allow users to share their images or videos.
- **On-line Mapping:** On-line mapping allows users to create or modify maps online.
- **On-line Games/Internet Virtual Worlds:** These are programs that simulate reality. Users can create a setting and artificial people to represent them and others.

These tools can be used singly or as part of a set called a *Mashup*. This allows new tools to be developed by combining existing tools in novel ways. There is also an almost constant evolution of new Web 2.0 Tools being developed and marketed.

Web 2.0 full ability to revolutionize advocacy is very probably as of yet untapped. It will clearly be a benefit to organizations who want both members and the general public to participate in the decision making and action processes. On balance, organizations that don't desire this and who are very concerned about message control will find this situation undesirable (see Germany, 2006 for a review of the issues). This is

the important distinction between the public interest organizations and the traditional associations.

Organizational Factors: There are variations in how readily organizations adopt new technology. Even given the desire to use technology strategically there can be factors that delay or even prevent the development of that technology.

There are many social science theories that seek to help us understand the variations among organizations in their use of different technologies. Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovation theory is one of the most robust and well documented. This will support the organizational component of the theoretical framework for this study.

Rogers (2003) argues that innovations are communicated to a succession of groups (innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards) via channels of communication.

Rogers (2003) recognized several characteristics of innovative organizations which include size (larger organizations are more likely to be innovative), structure, leader characteristics, centralization, formalization, interconnectedness, slack resources and system openness. He comments, however, that many of these dimensions are subsumed by organizational size and studies attempting to relate these factors to later innovations have had problems demonstrating significant relationships. In the current context, this would imply that larger organizations will be more innovative than their smaller counterparts.

Given this discussion, we would expect that older membership based organizations would be more willing to adopt Web 2.0 as part of their strategy on-line.

Participation is more important than message control. The newer groups would be far less likely to do that because message control is more important. We would also suspect that size would be an important predictor of Web 2.0 use. Given these propositions, we can advance the following hypotheses:

- 1) Older, Membership Based Organizations will adopt Web 2.0 at a higher rate than newer public interest organizations;
- 2) Larger organizations will adopt Web 2.0 at a higher rate than smaller organizations.

Methodology

This is an exploratory study of Web 2.0 use by national level environmental advocacy groups in the United States. The primary dependent variable is Web 2.0 use and the primary independent variables are organizational size and whether the organization was a public interest group or a member based interest group. We define public interest groups as those created after 1960.

Subjects: Forty Six Environmental Advocacy Organizations were selected for a purposive sample using the 2002 edition of Congressional Quarterly's *Public Interest Profiles*.

Organizations featured in *Public Interest Profiles* are ones that research has shown to be especially influential in national politics. This means that we are generally looking at the largest and most capable organizations. These are especially appropriate for this study because they would be the most likely to adopt cutting edge technology. We were able to access the websites all of the groups that were in the sample. The environmental movement is an especially fitting choice for this work because of the sector's reputation for employing technology in advocacy settings.

Research Methods: Primary data collection was accomplished with a content analysis procedure identifying Web 2.0 technologies present on the organization's website.

Social Networking Sites (Friendster, MySpace, Facebook and Change.org) were independently verified through those systems. In almost all cases, these sites were not directly linked to the websites. Data on staff size (which was used as a proxy for size), type of IRS Nonprofit Classification and date of founding was taken from *Public Interest Profiles*. There was a very small amount of missing data.

Results

All websites were coded during the Fall of 2007. Data on the social networking sites were collected separately. All data was combined into a single dataset.

Demographic Data: Most (89.1%) of the Organizations were classified as 501 © 3 nonprofits. One 501 © 3 organization indicated that it had also created a 501 © 4 for political advocacy. The rest were classified as 501 © 4s. Less than a third (30.4%) were founded before 1960.

Staff: The average size staff was 142.3 with a standard deviation of 285. The smallest organization had five staff members while the largest reported a staff size of 1,804.

Those founded before 1960 are much larger in size. The staff size for the pre-1960s organizations was 334.2 (SD=465.1), while the values for post 1960s organizations was 61.9 (SD= 85.4). The difference is statistically significant ($F=10.132$, $p=.003$).

Budget: The mean reported annual budget was \$17,696,625 (SD= 27,422,860.3) for all groups. The budgets for the pre-1960's organizations \$43,733,333.30 (SD=\$40,362,575.50) were considerably larger than the post 1960s organizations

\$7,508,347.82 (SD=\$9,021,935.0). The difference between groups was statistically significant ($F=17.179$, $P=.000$). These numbers should be interpreted with care because of missing data.

Members: Membership is a difficult issue in discussions of advocacy organizations because membership often means different things to different organizations. Traditional associations have one type of membership and public interest groups (if they have members) have quite another. In traditional association life members involves quite a bit of time and effort and the input of members is taken seriously. Members in public interest organizations might be members for the purpose of fundraising or for wrinkles in the IRS regulations (particularly the differentiation between Direct and Grassroots Lobbying for 501H Electors) governing nonprofit advocacy (this is not always the case). It is not possible from the data that we have to differentiate those shades of membership. There is a difference between organizations founded prior to 1960 and those founded later. The mean number of members is 2037307 (SD=3618592.4) for the older organizations and 105415.87 (SD=216331) for the newer ones. This difference is significant ($F= 9.056$ $p=.004$). Older organizations have more members. Ten organizations have no members and one reported twelve million members.

Technology: All organizations had a website and all collected donations on their website. The websites varied greatly in size and sophistication. Most were well developed and sophisticated examples of current website technology.

Three organizations used no Web 2.0 Technology while one used nine different tools. The total number of tools used is presented in Table One:

Table One: Number of Tools Coded by Organizations

Tools	N	%
.00	3	6.5
1.00	12	26.1
2.00	4	8.7
3.00	9	19.6
4.00	5	10.9
5.00	4	8.7
6.00	4	8.7
7.00	3	6.5
8.00	1	2.2
9.00	1	2.2
Total	46	100.0

The Mean number of tools coded was 3.2391, the Median was 3.0 and the Standard Deviation WAS 2.32077. The values for individual tools are presented in Table Two.

Table Two: Organizations Coded as Having Web 2.0 Tools

Tool	N	%
Blogging	23	50
Wiki	4	8.7
RSS	27	58.7
Podcasting	19	41.3
Image Sharing	9	19.6
Videosharing	11	23.9
Social Networking Site	38	84.8
Social Bookmarking	10	21.7
Mapping	6	13
Virtual Worlds	1	2.2

Social Networking Sites are clearly the most frequently identified, followed by RSS Feeds and Blogs. Mapping, Wikis and Virtual Worlds are the least frequent technologies represented.

Social Networking Sites have grown in popularity with the general public and in this population they are widely used. These sites are housed externally rather than being part of an organization's website. In our study there was rarely a link from the main organization's site to the social networking page. Table Three presents the results:

Table Three: Social Network Sites associated with advocacy organizations

Social Networking Site	N	%
Friendster	1	2.2
Facebook	6	13
MySpace	29	63
Change.Org	37	80.4

Part of the increase is the number of organizations that now have social network sites via change.org¹. Without this organization the portion of organizations with a social networking site drops to 63%. Some organizations had more than one site and in several cases, a site was created by a member or supporter.

¹ This is a social networking site that revolves around causes and nonprofits. As such, it differs from the other social network sites.

Predicting Technology Use

Our theoretical framework specifies that public interest group status and size are likely to predict the use of web 2.0 technology. The zero order correlations are presented below:

Table Four: Zero Order Correlations

		Public Interest	Size	Web 2.0 Use
Public Interest	r	1	-.428(**)	-.034
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003	.822
	N	46	46	46
Staff	r	-.428(**)	1	.112
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003		.460
	N	46	46	46
Web 2.0 Use	r	-.034	.112	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.822	.460	
	N	46	46	46

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Except for the relationship between staff size and public interest group status (alluded to earlier), the correlations are remarkably modest. It is no surprise that the subsequent regression analysis failed to explain much of the variance.

Regression Analysis

An OLS Regression Analysis was conducted on the variables of interest. The results suggest a very tentative relationship or perhaps no relationship between technology and organizational size and type.

The regression results were very modest. The Multiple R was .113 and the R² .013. The F-Test was not significant (F=.277, p=.759). As Table Five shows, the coefficients for staff size and public interest were not significant:

Table Five: Regression Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.040	.773		3.932	.000
	Public Interest	.084	.836	.017	.101	.920
	Size)	.001	.001	.119	.710	.482

These results should be considered as heuristic in nature because of the small sample size.

Discussion

The organizations in this study appear to be highly active in using Web 2.0 techniques for the protection of the environment. This bodes well for the future of advocacy technology and for protection of the environment. It is also consistent with the general view that environmental NGOs are leaders in the use of technology (Zelwietro, 1998).

Earlier in the paper, we advanced two propositions, neither of which was supported by the data. We postulated that organizations that were older, membership based associations started before 1960 would be more interested in Web 2.0 technologies than the newer public interest organizations. That did not prove to be true. This made almost no difference in the result.

In addition to organizational type, we also postulated that size was a determinant of Web 2.0 adoption. This also was not supported by the data. Size apparently mattered little. These are both surprising relationships

There are several factors that cloud the relationship or lack of relationship. The relationship between the adoption of technology and size is a stable finding in many

studies of nonprofit technology (Cortes & Rafter, 2007). Larger organizations generally are more likely to adopt technology. The probable underlying factor in this process is slack resources.

These are very influential and generally well supported organizations which could mean that slack resources might not be an issue. There might not be enough variation in size to detect the very small differences in technology. Another consideration is that much of the Web 2.0 technology is advertising supported and nearly free². This might mean that resources are not the problem that they are for other types of technology.

The other issue is organizational strategy. Web 2.0 would seem to complicate the strategy of many public interest organizations to control the message. That doesn't seem to square with the data that we have here. One obvious possibility is that the public interest groups have moved away from this strategy. It might be the process of organizational maturation or a realization that the earlier strategy had undesirable consequences. It might also be true that the rising public support for environmental issues might have pushed the environmental organizations away from this strategy. The original justification for this approach was a lack of support for post material issues.

There are other possible explanations. There might be a disconnect between those who plan technology and those who plan political strategy. While this was a likely explanation in the past, the growing sophistication of political operatives in the use of technology makes this unlikely. Another option is the result of consultant advice. A large group of professional political consultants who specialize in on-line advocacy has

² Of course staff time is always a consideration.

grown up in Washington, D.C. and many state capitals. Many of these websites mentioned the involvement of political consulting organizations. Consultants can provide a network between organizations. It is also likely that at least some political consultants offer fairly standard approaches to nonprofit technology issues. Finally, the influence of organizational fields might be significant. These are organizations that are arguably leaders in a particular field and therefore will adopt its norms. There is also the significant pressure toward isomorphic behavior in organizational fields.

This research should be seen in light of its limitations. We can only tell who uses which technology not how much they use it or what their internal thoughts about how it should be used are. This might not be as important as it might seem because of the user generated content attribute. How the organization wants the tool used is not as important as what the user of the tool perceives it as being. It does not allow us to understand the processes by which decisions are made about technology, about political strategy or about their interaction. It also does not provide the longitudinal analysis that might be very useful in understanding these issues.

This is also a small group of organizations and does not reflect the vast majority of the environmental organizations. A larger, more comprehensive study might provide the degree of variation that this study does not provide.

This research does suggest future research about this phenomenon. A complementary study that looks at the internal dynamics of these organizations with respect to technology strategy would be helpful.

It might also be useful to examine organizations that were smaller and/or more locally based. There are a considerable number of such organizations outside the beltway.

Implications for Nonprofit Theory and Practice: This study has a number of implications for nonprofit theory. The most obvious is the dissonance between the data on technology strategy and the aims of the public interest groups. This may support Norris' (2002) counterpoint to Putnam (2000) and Skocpol's (2003) contentions that civic involvement is declining. Norris argues that it has gone to other venues such as the Internet.

Another inference is that new technologies can be implemented rather quickly. These are essentially new technologies and their widespread use is somewhat remarkable.

These organizations have created some interesting applications of the technology that can be modeled elsewhere. PETA's use of Second Life (http://blog.peta.org/archives/second_life/) and the Natural Resources Defense Council's use of Google Earth (<http://www.nrdc.org/reference/maps.asp>) seem especially noteworthy.

The Web 2.0 revolution can be a useful step in the right direction for many nonprofit organizations. It can be a way to attain many of the things that nonprofits strive for within a technological realm. Technology need not be about boxes and transistors and keyboards and such. It can be about networking and social capital and community, all in the cause of social justice.

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