



THE NON-GOVERNMENT AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR, ICT, AND DEMOCRACY

- INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

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The award of the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize to the *Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons* has again focused international public attention on the role and importance of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in social and political life. NGOs, together with other groups that rely to a greater or lesser extent on volunteers such as local voluntary organisations (LVOs), often provide services to the community and undertake tasks that the government cannot or will not do.

To date, researchers in the field of e-democracy have paid little attention to this sector. Rather, they have placed the most part of their focus on government-citizen interactions on a national level. Little research to date has taken place on a macro-local level into how and to what extent NGOs use information and communication technologies (ICT) for member or citizen engagement and the promotion of internal democratic governance. Research also is lacking on the micro-global level concerning an understanding of why people participate in, and tools that support, autonomous movements and the peer-communication within.

For this reason, IJPIS has chosen to publish this special issue on “The non-government and voluntary sector, ICT, and democracy.” The purpose of this special issue is to highlight the relationship between the use of ICT in the governance and activities of NGOs, on the one hand, and in informal political participation on the other.

This special issue contains contributions from research that examines, in different ways, how the voluntary sector uses ICT to support both internally, its democratic structures, and externally, democracy in the community. The authors represented in this issue come from a variety of disciplines such as computer science, economics, political

science and informatics, and the studies they present come from four different continents covering the use of online phenomena such as crowdsourcing, community journalism, blogging and social media. What unites these articles is first that they situate ICT in a wider social context and second that they add a critical perspective to ICT practices by using methodologies from fields such as communication studies, gender studies and development.

Crowdsourcing has been promoted lately as a means to make different tasks more efficient and decentralized. But what are the factors that motivate participation in this type of voluntary work? Johan Hellström has looked at UgandaWatch to identify factors and elements that influence the use of mobile-enabled crowdsourcing. Initiated by an international NGO together with civil society organisations in Uganda, UgandaWatch is an open crowdsourcing platform for citizen reporting of electoral irregularities. The hope is that this platform will offer citizens an alternative channel to that of traditional news reporting, one where participants can report directly. Hellström's study shows how this simple text-based tool can motivate groups that otherwise do not normally participate online to become engaged. In so doing, it can supplement and enrich traditional means of participation.

Studying the real effects of ICT in an NGO is difficult as ICT is only one component of many communication practices. In their article about ICT in Brazilian non-profit organizations, Fabio Senne and Alexandre Barbosa apply a methodology that looks at ICT as a way to expand human capabilities. Using Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, they seek to go beyond the discussions about access and use and instead explore how ICT can be used as a means for empowerment. This approach suggests that evaluators of ICT projects need to use indicators that measure people's ICT practice, rather than simply people's access to ICT. In their study of data from almost 400,000 organisations, Senne and Barbosa show how the Capability Approach can be operationalized on a large scale. The results suggest a strong correlation between attitudes towards ICT and the existence of overall communication strategies.

An alternative methodology is also central to Marius Rohde Johannessen's case study of political participation in a Norwegian municipality. Using Genre Theory to examine political protesters' communication practices, Johannessen focuses on language and practices rather than on technology in order to discover how communication practices change in different technical contexts. The study shows how a public sphere is shaped by different genres and how traditional media reaches a broad audience while social media has a narrower audience. The findings in this case support Fraser's [1990] idea of a subaltern public sphere, where several fragmented public spheres exist in parallel to the dominant public spheres.

E-democracy can be divided into different positions [Bellamy 2000; Dahlberg 2011; Päiväranta and Sæbø 2006] or directions on a map, all of which are related to each other and to micro/macro and local/global processes needed for the implementation of e-democracy [Hansson 2015]. These should not be misunderstood as radically different positions, but rather as mutually dependent democratic objectives.

In a qualitative study of patients' blogs, Lisa Hansson and Elin Wihlborg examine these mutual dependencies and the complexity of political participation online, describing the development of community and citizenship among cancer patients in the blogosphere. In the study, Hansson and Wihlborg describe the development of ICT-supported political participation, from the sharing of personal narratives on private blogs to deliberative discussions in the blogs' comment sections and organized actions through an NGOs website. Here the blog tools enable patients to develop their own

stories in interaction with a wider public, something that creates a space for deliberative discussions and the development of community. The study shows how a diversity of public spheres is maintained online through different actor-mediated activity. It also shows how an organization representing patients creates a political community and a platform for political actions outside the dominant public sphere. The importance of a patient NGO in creating a political community and the interaction between independent bloggers and the NGO is highlighted.

Participatory Journalism is another expression for grassroots activism that has been fueled by the access to online publication channels. However, as Supriya Rakesh's critical examination of Video Volunteers shows, subtle processes of inclusion and exclusion shape the way that different actors are represented online. This examination of a citizen journalism NGO in India focuses on the NGO's online identity. It shows how stereotypical identities and differences between the NGO representative and the local citizen journalists are echoed online. The NGO representatives are represented as innovative and socially responsible patrons on a larger scale. The citizen journalists are represented as marginalized, excluded and looking to make a local difference.

Overall, these articles contribute to giving us a better understanding of the volunteer sector's ICT practices. They provide examples of ICT use from an institutional perspective as well as from the perspective of individuals inside and outside of those institutions, and they show the relation between different technologies, organizations and identities that emerge when creating a political sphere. Online tools make large scale organisation of volunteer activities easier at the same time as the public sphere is becoming more difficult to navigate, demanding an ever higher level of digital literacy of those who want to participate in it. Broad participation is enabled by easy, accessible technology such as UgandaWatch, but the public sphere can be difficult to access for reasons such as a lack of available roles to play in the dominant discourse, as is seen in the case from India. Seeing the roles that the NGOs play in creating and maintaining alternative public spheres is especially interesting. These spheres have been realized by providing not only infrastructure, but by accommodating people's need to belong, for recognition and for places to meet.

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