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The New Information Technologies:

Empowerment for Southern Non-governmental Organisations

A paper submitted for the
“Information Technology: Enhancing or Limiting Democracy in Asia?”
Parallel Session at the 8th AMIC Annual Conference

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The New Information Technologies:
Empowerment for Southern Non-governmental Organisations

New digital political spaces with lively actors are emerging because of the new Information Technologies. Do the social actors in these new digital political spaces have the potential to create a more civil society? The potential of the new Information Technologies to transform political public spaces and the public opinion that is produced within them is increasingly being discussed. Unfortunately, there have been few, if any, studies to examine thoroughly the exact nature of the digital political spaces created by the new Information Technologies and to investigate how social actors like Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) can influence the construction of political public opinion and become involved in the decision-making processes present within these digital political spaces. In this paper, I examine the creation of the digital political spaces by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). Additionally, I investigate how Southern NGOs like Sakshi in India, EcoNews Africa in Africa and ModemMujer in Mexico are influencing the construction of public opinion within these digital political spaces. Finally, I illustrate how the APC and the United Nations are trying to involve Southern NGOs even more by incorporating Information Technologies into the decision-making processes of world conferences sponsored by the United Nations.
The New Information Technologies:
Empowerment for Southern Non-governmental Organisations

In April 1997, Jon Katz (1997/1998) declared the "Birth of a Digital Nation" in Wired, a magazine that examines the politics and culture of the new Information Technologies (including, for example, e-mail, electronic bulletin boards, the Internet and the World Wide Web). His announcement was based on the new type of political public opinion that he discovered on the Internet during the 1996 United States election campaign period. Several months later, Katz's hypotheses were tested by the Wired/Merrill Lynch Forum Digital Citizen Survey in which 1,444 randomly selected Americans were polled to explore their opinions on society and technology. The results defied the conventional wisdom on digital politics:

Almost all conventional wisdom about digital culture--especially as conveyed in recent years by journalists, politicians, intellectuals, and other fearful guardians of the existing order--is dead wrong. The Internet, it turns out, is not a breeding ground for disconnection, fragmentation, paranoia, and apathy. Digital Citizens are not alienated, either from people or from civic institutions....Instead, the online world encompasses many of the most informed and participatory citizens we have ever had or are likely to have. (Katz, 1997, p. 71)

Although the survey was small and limited to citizens from the United States, it did illustrate that new digital political spaces with lively
actors are emerging because of the new Information Technologies. Katz (1997/1998) believes the social actors in these new digital political spaces have the potential to create a more civil society:

Of all the prospects raised by the evolution of digital culture, the most tantalizing is the possibility that technology could fuse with politics to create a more civil society. It's the possibility that we could end up with a media and political culture in which people could amass factual material, voice their perspectives, confront other points of view, and discuss issues in a rational way. (para. 64)

The potential of the new Information Technologies to transform political public spaces and the public opinion that is produced within them is increasingly being discussed. Some studies (e.g. Braman, 1996; Fernback, 1997; Simonsen, 1996/1998) believe that the new Information Technologies could have positive implications for political public spaces. Most (e.g. Breslow, 1997; Poster, 1995, 1995/1998; Tsagarousianou, 1998; Verstraeten, 1996) are more ambivalent; and of course, there are those (e.g. Kinney, 1996; Sobchack, 1996) who believe that the Information Technologies will have an extremely negative impact on the production of political public opinion in political public spaces. Unfortunately there have been few, if any, studies to examine thoroughly the exact nature of the digital political spaces created by Information Technologies and to investigate how social actors like Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) can influence the construction of political public opinion and become involved in the
decision-making processes present within these digital political spaces.

In this paper, I examine the creation of the digital political spaces by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). Additionally, I investigate how Southern NGOs like Sakshi in India, EcoNews Africa in Africa and ModemMujer in Mexico are influencing the construction of public opinion within these digital political spaces. Finally, I illustrate how the APC and the United Nations are trying to involve Southern NGOs even more by incorporating Information Technologies into the decision-making processes of world conferences sponsored by the United Nations.

The APC's Digital Political Spaces

Throughout its twelve-year evolution, the APC has been creating digital political spaces for NGOs. It was initiated, for example in 1987, ...

[when] the people at GreenNet in England began collaborating with their counterparts at the Institute for Global Communications (IGC)--then known as PeaceNet/EcoNet--in the United States. These two networks started sharing electronic conference material and demonstrated that transnational electronic communications could serve international as well as domestic communities working for peace, human rights and the environment. ("About APC-A Brief History", 1999, para. 2)
In 1989, these two groups were joined by networks in Sweden (NordNet), Canada (Web), Brazil (AlterNex), Nicaragua (Nicarao) and Australia (Pegasus); and in 1990, they founded the APC to co-ordinate their operations and development (“About APC-A Brief History”, 1999, para. 3).

The APC is now the world’s most extensive network of Information Technology providers dedicated to serving NGOs by providing fast, reliable, easy-to-use communication tools, training and support. Specifically, the APC member networks provide the following services and support for NGOs:

- Internet access; training and support for users, trainers and facilitators; exclusive news and information services;
- Communications consulting; online collaboration strategies and methodologies; WWW site development; public and private workspaces including mailing lists and newsgroups; and
- Customised information tools such as databases and search engines. (“Members & Services-APC Services”, 1999, para. 2)

The APC’s stated mission is: “to build strategic communities and initiatives for the purpose of making meaningful contributions to equitable human development, social justice, participatory political processes and environmental sustainability” (“About APC-Mission Statement”, 1999, para. 1). Its main goal is to empower and support the NGOs that are working for environmental, social and economic justice—especially those in the South that traditionally have little access to the new Information Technologies. According to Mathews (1997), “The
nonprofit Association for Progressive Communications provides 50,000 NGOs in countries access to tens of millions of Internet users for the price of a local phone call” (p. 54).

“Real Life Strategic Uses”
of APC Networks by Southern NGOs

The APC World Wide Web site includes what it calls “Real Life Strategic Uses of APC Networks”. Here, it presents examples of how NGOs (especially Southern NGOs) have influenced political public opinion through their use of Information Technology in digital political spaces. In this section of the paper, I will focus on the Southern NGO examples of Sakshi in India, EcoNews Africa in Africa and ModemMujer (Modern Woman) in Mexico.

Sakshi

Sakshi is a women’s rights NGO based in New Delhi, India, that used the APC’s Information Technology services to campaign for sexual harassment legislation. Because it did not have an actual World Wide Web connection to access World Wide Web sites or electronic databases on the Internet, Sakshi received the following assistance in gathering information from the APC Women’s Networking Support Programme:
APC women were able to undertake WWW research for Sakshi to help them build their case. Also, the Programme publicised the work of Sakshi on various mailing lists, with the caution that anyone wishing to support Sakshi's work be considerate of their limited online capacity.... ("Programmes-Strategic Uses: Sexual Harassment Legislation", 1999, para. 2)

With APC's Information Technology assistance, Sakshi was able to get landmark sexual harassment legislation passed in 1997. According to Sakshi, this was accomplished because of the direct involvement of other women's NGOs:

In view of the increase of cases reported on sexual harassment of women, the Supreme Court of India, on a writ filed by women's NGOs, has laid down guidelines to obviate such harassment at places of work, and at other institutions including universities, hospitals and other professional bodies. ("Programmes-Strategic Uses: Sexual Harassment Legislation", 1999, para. 2)

This example illustrates how Southern NGOs without full Internet access can network with NGOs that have full Internet access to do their research. This networking empowers these Southern NGOs and allows them to compete with more powerful political or economic actors.

EcoNews Africa

EcoNews Africa is a Kenya-registered NGO that analyses global environment and development issues from an African perspective and
reports on local, national, and regional activities that contribute to
global solutions. "EcoNews Africa used APC networks to highlight the
plight of a Maasai community that was threatened with eviction a
General Management Plan written for the community by the
Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority" ("Programmes-Strategic
Uses: EcoNews Africa", 1999, para. 2). Because the Maasai
community was not online, or even literate, EcoNews Africa presented
the Maasai's position:

Through APC [electronic] conferences and the EcoNews Africa
WWW site, the Maasai were able to express their lack of
participation in the whole process, their fears and what they
proposed to do. The story drew a lot of attention, especially from
donors and concerned individuals who began asking questions,
which initiated a public debate on the issue. ("Programmes-
Strategic Uses: EcoNews Africa", 1999, para. 2)

It is important to note that EcoNews Africa incorporated photographs
and textual translations from a video of Maasai traditional meetings into
their World Wide Web site.

By incorporating the Maasai's own words into the World Wide
Web site, this group of people were given a voice—even without
Information Technology skills or English language ability. Because of
the APC's technical assistance, EcoNews Africa was able to present
the Maasai's plight, in their own words, to a global audience. "The
Maasai, on learning of the attention to their situation, expressed that
they were happy to be part of a larger global community that was
ModemMujer (Modem Woman) was established in 1995 as a joint initiative of five women's organisations in Mexico City, Mexico. Its goal is to exchange information and to improve information flow between Mexico City and Mexico's outlying states. ModemMujer extensively used APC's networks at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (UNWCW). For example,

...ModemMujer identified key women's NGOs or individuals with e-mail access in different regions [of Mexico] and transmitted information from the UN conference to these women, who in turn sent it out via fax, radio, press, and other means. There was a three-woman team covering events in the NGO and official conferences in China who sent back not only news about the events in Spanish, but also editorials and personal accounts of the excitement of being there. ("Programmes-Strategic Uses: ModemMujer", 1999, para. 2)

ModemMujer not only transmitted information from the UNWCW to women in Mexico, but collected information from Mexico to pass to the official Mexican delegation: "The team also received information from all over Mexico to apply pressure at the right points in Beijing, and were even able to get information to the official Mexican delegation's NGO
representatives” (“Programmes-Strategic Uses: ModemMujer”, 1999, para. 2).

ModemMujer is an excellent example of how Southern NGOs can use Information Technologies. Firstly, they used the new Information Technologies to supplement existing communication technologies. “The ModemMujer experience demonstrated how well electronic communication can fit into a wider communication strategy, enhancing existing communication tools such as radio, meetings, faxes and traditional press work” (“Programmes-Strategic Uses: ModemMujer”, 1999, para. 2) Additionally, they ensure the greatest level of participation by providing a personalised approach to Information Technology:

[ModemMujer]...also uses personal e-mail contact, letting women know what's new in their conference, and offering to send documents via email if anyone has trouble accessing conferences. They invite women to ask for help if they have trouble accessing information, and offer basic support or refer user problems to the provider network, LaNeta. This unique element of personalized communication has helped women feel more connected and interested, and has encouraged greater participation. (“Programmes-Strategic Uses: ModemMujer”, 1999, para. 3)
The United Nations and Information Technologies

As an NGO with consultative status to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, the APC has also been particularly effective in forging communication links between NGOs and the United Nations community. Since 1992, it has served as the primary telecommunications provider for both NGOs and United Nations' delegates at global conferences such as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (UNWCW) in 1995. Because of the communication successes achieved at these global conferences, the United Nations itself has recognised the unique potential of the new Information Technologies to directly involve NGOs and the general public in its decision-making.

The first NGO use of Information Technologies at a United Nations conference was at the UNCED in Rio in 1992. According to Hinchberger (1993),

During the PrepCom process, NGOs used the interconnected national and international e-mail networks for debates, information-sharing, and meeting preparation. Over thirty electronic 'conferences', bulletin boards for information exchange on specific topics, were available to users connected to the electronic umbrella group, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). A project directed by a Brazilian NGO, IBASE, and its Alternex system, [and] supported by the United
Nations, provided extensive e-mail facilities during the Earth Summit. The system increased information flow among those in Rio de Janeiro, and allowed interested parties unable to make the trip to follow the unfolding events. (p. 52)


Three years later, at the UNWCW, NGO use of Information Technologies increased considerably because the United Nations also incorporated them into its official activities. In addition to e-mail and electronic conferencing, an official UNWCW “real-time” World Wide Web site was created so that NGOs could access “Official Documents”, “Press Releases”, “Statements by Governments”, “Statements by United Nations and Inter-governmental Organisations”, “Statements by Non-governmental Organisations”, and a “Photo Gallery” as they were presented or produced (Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995/1999).

NGOs gained several advantages from the use of the new Information Technologies at the UNCED and the UNWCW. First, the electronic conferences, the use of e-mail and World Wide Web sites increased the information flow among the various political, economic...
and social actors before and during the conferences. Additionally, absent NGO actors could actually follow the proceedings and provide their own opinions that could then be transmitted back to the official conferences. Although these two advantages benefited mainly Northern NGOs and Southern NGOs like ModemMujer, they still represented a significant step forward because the NGO actors now had the ability to become involved in the production of the public opinion that could influence United Nations nation-state policy making.

Because of the digital communicative successes achieved at the UNCED and the UNWCW, the United Nations has begun to incorporate the new Information Technologies into its own reform activities. One example is the United Nations Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development's (DPCSD) aim of directly involving nation-states, non-governmental organizations, academia and the public-at-large in the UN's decision-making process. According to one United Nations press release,

A new line of information services on the Internet was introduced by the United Nations Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development (DPCSD) on 24 October [1995] to coincide with the General Assembly discussion during its fiftieth session on An Agenda for Development into the next century. ("United Nations Advances", 1995, para. 1)

Not only does the DPCSD want to use the new media technologies to provide information, but it also hopes to incorporate the global
networking capabilities of the new Information Technologies into its decision-making process:

With this initiative, the DPCSD is leading the way for others in the United Nations Secretariat in the promotion of "participatory development". Through a combination of World Wide Web, Internet gopher and electronic mail access, the DPCSD takes the intergovernmental negotiating process in the economic and social fields directly to the desktops of Member States, as well as other international organizations, non-governmental organizations, academia and the public-at-large. ("United Nations Advances", 1995, para. 4)

Through the creative use of the new Information Technologies, the United Nations Economic and Social Development (UNESD) department is attempting to meet the DPCSD's goal. One result of this initiative is the UNESD interactive World Wide Web site which offers "Reports of Proceedings" with hypertext links, "Parliamentary Documentation", "Official Statements", "Public Information Material", "Customized Links to Other Resources", "Discussion Papers" and "Online Conferences" (United Nations Economic and Social Development Department, 1999).

The most innovative aspects of the UNESD World Wide Web site are the "Discussion Papers" section and the "Online Conferences" facility. In the "Discussion Papers" section, preliminary documents are posted on the UNESD site to stimulate public discussion and produce critical comments that can then be sent to the UNESD department.

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through e-mail. With the “Online Conferences” facility, NGOs and the general public can share ideas on current global issues with experts and members of a global community. The results of these discussions are then summarised and presented to the experts and United Nations commission members as background information for on-site, real-time global meetings or conferences.

Conclusion

The creation of digital political spaces by the APC, the use of the new Information Technologies by Southern NGOs in these spaces and their incorporation into the United Nations’ decision-making processes provides the potential for Southern NGOs to actually become involved in the discussions of actions that need to be taken with regard to important political, economic and social issues. These developments support Katz’s belief that technology could fuse with politics to form a more civil society with informed and participatory citizens.

Moreover, these developments bolster Clark’s (1995) contention that a nascent international civil society is emerging because of NGO use of Information Technology to create digital political spaces:

With increasingly dense networks of communications and informational exchange in the 20th century, international NGOs now also pursue concerns with other NGOs in self-created international arenas. In this respect, the interaction of NGOs might be said to form a nascent international civil society, which
is independent of government policy making paths but brings individuals and grassroots groups together for informational exchange and political action. (p. 514)

Mathews (1997) concurs that a part of the recent communicative successes of NGOs in creating global public opinion is their use of the new Information Technologies: "Technology is fundamental to NGOs' new clout....The dramatically lowered costs of international communication have altered NGOs' goals and changed international outcomes" (p. 54).

Will Southern NGOs be able to change international outcomes? Already, as we have seen in the cases of Sakshi and EcoNews Africa, they are certainly capable of changing national outcomes. The case of ModemMujer indicates that the increased use of the new Information Technologies in United Nations' conferences and decision-making certainly provides the potential for Southern NGOs to become empowered and to influence international decision-making with regard to important political, economic and social issues.
References


