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# Advocacy Organizations and the Organizational Digital Divide

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Abstract

The development of electronic advocacy techniques have offered advocates important ways to deal with the challenges presented by the new advocacy environment. These challenges include globalization, devolution and the growth of wired government. Unfortunately, many organizations lack the technology capacity to take advantage of these new tools. This paper discusses the organizational digital divide as it applies to advocacy groups, discusses the consequences of the digital divide for advocacy organizations and analyzes the challenges that these groups will face overcoming the divide. The paper also discusses strategies that might be employed to provide needed resources.

## Introduction

Advocacy organizations are often engaged in lopsided battles with the forces of power and privilege. Their opponents have money, connections and access, but they have the people and the cause of social justice on their side. While battles are lost, advocates have always created ways to deal with the imbalance of power.

In order to deal with these power differentials, advocates have developed a set of techniques. These methods include community organizing, lobbying, the creation of campaigns for political candidates, running for public office, referenda and recall petitions and so forth (Ezell, 2001; Haynes & Mickelson, 2000; Jansson, 1998). As a group, this collection of tools has been somewhat effective in promoting progressive causes.

While the enormous resources that powerful groups, many of whom are opposed to progressive causes, have at their disposal will always be difficult to defeat, some gains have been made through the activities of progressive organizations. Their ability to produce these effects is tied to a set of institutional and systemic parameters. These systems provide the attachment points for interventions in the political system. Without this set of familiar contingencies it is likely that the techniques will either not work or not work as well. To put it more bluntly, part of the repertoire of

tactics and techniques that progressive organizations employ are reaching the end of their shelf life and will have to be supplemented by new strategies if they are to remain viable.

## The Changing Technology of Advocacy

Social change is glacially slow but eventually, society does evolve into something different. Many of the long-held methods for advocacy are changing as the industrial society passes the baton to the new information economy (Fitzgerald & McNutt, 1999; Hick & McNutt, 2002; McNutt, 1996). Some of these forces will assist the task of advocates for social change while others will reduce their chances of success. Some forces can either be a friend or a foe depending on the context that they are presented within.

The use of the Internet by progressive groups is clearly one of those forces (Hick & McNutt, 2002; McNutt, 2000). While some will argue that the Internet is the "great equalizer", leveling the playing field (Browning, 1996), others will note the growing commercialization and regulation of the Internet as well as the use of the Internet to encourage politics as usual (Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998). In order for the Internet to be an ally, it is critical that advocacy organizations have the resources and ability to make use of what the technology has to offer. This requires not only the access to technology itself but also the human talent to turn the technology into an effective tool. Nonprofits have often lagged behind the commercial and governmental sectors in using information and communication technology effectively (Burt & Taylor, 2000; Grobman, 2001; Grobman & Grant, 1998). This situation may be more pronounced in organizations that are small and under funded, such as advocacy organizations. In some cases, it is clear that they do not have this capacity or do not utilize the technology adequately. This is an aspect of what scholars are calling the *organizational digital divide*. This paper will explore impact of the organizational digital divide for advocacy organizations.

While it is frequently recognized that there is a digital divide for individuals (Ebo, 1998; Norris, 2001; NTIA 2004), there is less recognition that organizations often suffer the same fate and with the same consequences (see Blau, 2001). The consequences for individuals can be dire and may be considered eventual separation from the information economy. This is also true for the population of organizations as well. Organizations that are not “wired” cannot participate.

## The Organizational Digital Divide

Simply put, the organizational digital divide is the difference between those organizations that have effective technology as opposed to those that do not. These organizations are less able to participate in critical aspects of functioning and may be less able to compete for funding, for clients and for recognition. In an emerging information society, the organizational digital divide will most likely be a death sentence for at least some nonprofit organizations.

Nonprofits often lack the funds and technological expertise needed to benefit from information technology. Equally important, is the push to devote organizational resources toward computerization. This appears to be less of a problem in commercial organizations but many nonprofits seem resistant to incorporation of information and communication technology.

The problem may be more serious in organizations engaged in advocacy, activism and policy change. Typically small and under funded, they may not have the resources needed to employ technology (Boris & Mosher-Williams, 1998; DeVita & Mosher-Williams, 2001). While it is difficult to make generalizations based on the data that we have available, this state of chronic resource poverty appears to be true across nations and across issues areas. This situation is problematic because advocacy organizations, in many ways, have the most to gain from technology. Technology can improve their management of resources and their efficiency and effectiveness. The development of new advocacy technology, based on the Internet and related high technology, is one area where progress can be made (Hick & McNutt, 2002; McNutt & Boland, 1999). This is especially true where the political structure has adopted new technology that might improve responsiveness, but only for those who have technology access. The rise of wired legislatures, electronic government, on-line rule making and the technological expertise of competing interest groups make Internet capacity essential for the advocacy community. If one group has access and another does not, new technology presents a barrier to political participation.

## Advocacy Organizations and the Digital Divide

Electronic Advocacy represents a considerable transition in advocacy practice and one that has grown significantly in recent years (Hick & McNutt, 2002; McNutt, 2000). Starting from the influence of local groups and community and neighborhood problems (Schwartz, 1996), the use of the Internet has blossomed into a well-respected advocacy method with

worldwide scope and reach (Hick & McNutt, 2002; McNutt & Appenzeller, 2004).

Electronic advocacy refers to use of high technology to influence the decision making process (Fitzgerald & McNutt, 1999; Hick & McNutt, 2002; McNutt & Boland, 1999). This can vary from an e-mail campaign on a minor issue to online civil disobedience.

Any list of techniques is likely to become obsolete rather quickly because of advances in the base technology. This having been said, some of the techniques that are presently used are presented in figure 1.

Figure 1: Techniques Used In On-Line Advocacy

- Electronic Mail to Coordinate Policy Influence Efforts within your organization
- Chat Rooms
- Databases
- Listservs
- Broadcast Fax
- Targeting and Mapping Software
- Meet Up
- Blogs
- Websites
- Wireless
- On-line Petitions
- On-Line Survey
- Teleconferencing
- On-Line Fundraising
- Banner Ads
- Short Message Service & Instant Messaging
- Wireless

These tools are combined in evolving practice models that guide practitioner utilization and decision-making. In one approach there are four basic processes in electronic advocacy: Issue Research, Information Dissemination/Awareness, Coordination/Organizing and Influence (McNutt, Bartron, Garnes & Stricker, 2002; McNutt & Penkaukaus, 1999). Issue research means using the considerable power of the Internet to research issues, do opposition research and create the knowledge base for subsequent organizing and education. Dissemination and Awareness campaigns educate the public about issues and proposals. Organizing and coordination refers to the work of organizing campaigns and coalitions. Finally, applying pressure means using technology based tools to directly influence decisions. These processes are helpful at different points in the advocacy process and should be considered a set of interrelated tasks rather than a stage model of practice.

Electronic advocacy is a practice that is growing in importance. Some of the indicators of increasing use are increased media attention, a growing practice and empirical literature, growing use by large, well funded interest groups and political consulting forms and, finally,

research results from a number of sources demonstrating use (McNutt, 2000). As use increases, more sophisticated technologies are becoming more commonplace and new actors are entering the game.

Electronic Advocacy provides a competitive advantage for advocacy groups that make use of it. It offers substantially lower costs, the ability to advocate over distance, the promise of involving new groups of supporters and so forth (Hick & McNutt, 2002). These attributes make it much easier to deal with multiple targets and decentralized systems. It also improves our ability to deal with a more "wired" policy network where governments and interests make more extensive use of technology in their operations.

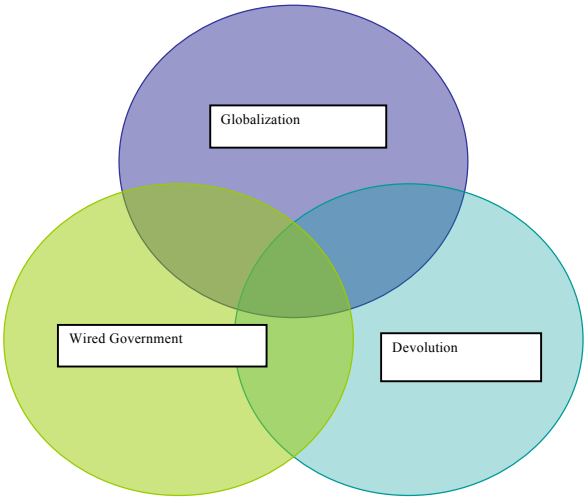
There is a dark side to these developments as well. The technology behind electronic advocacy has been adopted by public relations firms and others in the creation of astroturf -- synthetic grassroots involvement (McNutt & Boland, 2005). This can include member recruiting, public information campaigns and pressure efforts that have the look and feel of genuine grassroots efforts. This creates a serious threat to advocacy groups who do not avail themselves of the technology. If your opponents are making better use of emergent techniques than your organization, they will have an advantage.

While electronic advocacy techniques are useful in current advocacy situations, changes in the advocacy environment will add to their utility. These same changes may diminish the efficacy of traditional policy change methodologies, especially those aimed at local power development.

## The Changing Advocacy Environment

The Political economy of decision making in most of the Western Democracies has undergone tremendous change over the past three decades. The coming of the information economy, globalization, technology and related changes has altered the major institutions of government. This has created a new environment for advocates. Some of the forces that advocates face are devolution, the rise of technology in government and globalization (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Forces Leading to Change in Advocacy Practice Environments




*Devolution and Privatization:* Devolution, the movement of focus from central units to lower levels of administration is a worldwide trend. This includes movement to lower levels of government, privatization and deregulation. In the United States, the past ten years have seen movement of authority from the federal government to the states and even to local government (DiNitto, 2000). In addition, privatization (both to commercial and nonprofit organizations) is another aspects of this devolution trend. The logical conclusion of this situation is the development of the "Hollow State", a government that delivers no services (Peters, 1994).

While there are many aspects of devolution, some positive and others negative, for advocates a primary consideration is the proliferation of decision centers and their potential geographic dispersion. If, for example, policy making is relocated from the national level to the local level, advocacy groups will be forced to mount efforts at many other locations. No longer will efforts aimed solely at the national level be sufficient.

Given the limited resources of most advocacy groups, it is very difficult to deal with this emerging situation. Using traditional advocacy techniques in a significantly more diffuse decision environment will

require significant amounts of additional funds or an attenuation of potential arenas of concern. It is likely that these organizations will have a great deal of difficulty adapting to these new political realities because of the limitations of their resource base.

*Wired Government*: The growth of electronic government, E-Democracy and public technology is a related issue that requires a response from the advocacy community (McNutt, Boland & Haskett, 2002; Norris, 2001; West, 2005). E-government refers to "the delivery of information and services on-line through the Internet and other digital means" (West, 2000, p. 2).

While much of this activity is not particularly threatening to advocates, the growth of wired legislatures and on-line rule making can be either an opportunity or a barrier (Fountain, 2001; Norris, 2001). In the creation of wired legislatures, (Carter & Turner, 2001) governments have facilitated communication with legislators and access to documents via the Internet. While this is a wonderful for wired organizations, it puts those without access at a competitive disadvantage. In fact, one legislative director remarked to the author that her organization's interest in technology sophistication was largely motivated by technology developments in the legislature. In fast changing advocacy situations speed is the determinant of success. Organizations that can't match the speed of their more technology sophisticated competitors will lose out.

A similar situation exists with regard to the creation of regulations through on-line rule making (Carlitz & Gunn, 2002). While this eases the comment and review process for technology sophisticated stakeholders, it creates an uneven playing field for other organizations. This is an important area for advocacy organizations (Hoefer, 2000) and the inability to use the technology effectively means that some groups, and their supporters, will have a significantly reduced voice in the regulatory arena.

Electronic government does not replace traditional government participation. This would raise significant constitutional and legal issues in most democracies. Traditional ways to participate will remain. On balance, technology gives some groups potential advantages. As electronic government grows in sophistication and encompasses more governmental functions, organizations without technological competency will find themselves further and further behind. Unlike the other forces, this one is a direct alteration of the political environment that advocacy organizations interface with. These changes have direct consequences for social action and require technology sophistication to achieve a level playing field.

*Globalization:* The third force, Globalization, is, in part, a consequence of the information economy (McNutt, 1996), the continued evolution of world trade institutions and the growth of massive multinational corporations and institutions like the World Trade Organizations, The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The growth of globalization has moved much of the locus of control for local and even national economies elsewhere. This reduces the power of government and makes some of the earlier community organization strategies less effective.

Local power projection strategies, such as those advanced by Alinsky (1971) and Kahn (1982), depend on a local power structure that, properly motivated, can grant what advocates desire. In a globalized world, local power structures are often unable to grant concessions and are, in many cases, among the victims of oppressive activities. More satisfactory targets are often too far away to be influenced by a local organization. This greatly reduces the effectiveness of this type of approach[1].

*Consequences:* In the emerging advocacy situation, adoption of electronic advocacy techniques is an asset, a form of comparative advantage. As the course of devolution and globalization continues and e-government matures, the gap between wired and non-wired organizations will widen. To look at this in another way, organizations that can't compete in this new environment will not be able to successfully advance their causes. Ineffective organizations may not be able to secure funding and might eventually be unable to survive.

While adoption is more than a matter of overcoming barriers to adoption (Rogers, 2003), they are a critical part of the diffusion equation. If the advocacy community is going to continue to be effective, then it will have to overcome the barriers to adopting technology, particularly advocacy oriented technology.

## Barriers to Electronic Advocacy

The adoption of technology by nonprofit organizations has been considered problematic (Burt & Taylor, 2000; Grobman & Grant, 1998; Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2001) and this has created issues for the nonprofit sector as a whole. Nonprofit organizations are frequently seen as technologically backward when compared to commercial and public organizations. Part of this problem is the substantial set of barriers that nonprofits face when they try to avail themselves of new technology.

[1] These methods are still useful when issues are local in nature.

McNutt and Boland (1999, 2000) identified a number of potential barriers to technology acceptance by advocacy organizations. These were culled from the diffusion of innovation literature. They are listed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Barriers to Technology Adoption

- Management Approval
- Universal Access
- Adequate Equipment
- Expense
- Staff Expertise
- Space
- Resistance from Staff
- Awareness
- Resistance from External Stakeholders
- Resistance from Internal Stakeholders

The prevalence of these barriers was explored in a number of studies over a range of advocacy groups. These were largely state level nonprofit advocacy organizations engaged in some type of public policy change. They tended to be small organizations with limited resources and staff size. They also have a propensity to engage in public policy work. All of these studies were conducted between 1998 and 2002. Figure 4 lists these studies.

Figure 4: Studies of electronic advocacy

- 1998 National Association of Social Workers Study (McNutt & Boland, 1999)
- 2000 Public Interest Research Group (McNutt & Boland, 2000)
- 2001 State Child Advocacy (McNutt, Keaney, Crawford, Schubert & Sullivan, 2001)
- 2002 National Child Advocacy (McNutt, Rowland, Keaney, Howard, Bartron, Crawford, Garnes, & Stricker, 2002).
- 2001 Boston Area Advocacy Groups (McNutt, Burke, Boland, Bartron, J & Rice, D 2001, March)

Each of these organizations was asked to identify the barriers to use of electronic advocacy technology. Exactly the same item was used for each group in each one of the studies. The results were combined to create Table 1.

Table 1: Barriers Identified by Advocacy Organizations

| | State | | National | | Boston | | PIRG | | NASW | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Barrier | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Expertise | 32 | 69.6 | 23 | 59 | 24 | 61.5 | 17 | 94.4 | 31 | 66.0 |
| Expense | 29 | 63 | 22 | 56.4 | 20 | 51.3 | 14 | 77.8 | 27 | 57.4 |
| Equipment | 20 | 43.5 | 16 | 42.1 | 21 | 53.8 | 11 | 61.1 | 21 | 44.7 |
| Access (Universal) | 13 | 28.3 | 13 | 33 | 6 | 15.4 | 9 | 50.00 | 18 | 38.3 |
| Awareness | 8 | 17.4 | 12 | 30.8 | 6 | 15.4 | 4 | 22.2 | 23 | 48.9 |
| External Resistance | 5 | 10.9 | 3 | 7.7 | 4 | 10.3 | 1 | 5.6 | 6 | 12.8 |
| Internal Resistance | 2 | 4.3 | 3 | 7.7 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5.6 | 3 | 6.4 |
| Management val | 2 | 4.3 | 3 | 7.7 | 4 | 10.3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2.1 |
| Staff Resistance | 2 | 4.3 | 5 | 12.8 | 5 | 12.8 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4.3 |
| Space | 0 | 0 | 3 | 7.7 | 2 | 5.1 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 12.8 |

Expertise is the most commonly identified barrier all the studies, followed by expense. Equipment is usually reported third in frequency. Very few organizations among those studied identified management, staff or stakeholder resistance. This suggests that there is a knowledge and financial gap that interferes with the adoption of technology. While it is also possible that other barriers may emerge when these barriers are addressed, the expertise and expense barriers appear to be the most salient. Given what we know about the sector, these are not surprising findings. On balance, they may be the most difficult barriers to overcome.

Implications of the Barrier Analysis

It is not surprising that small, underfunded advocacy groups[2] will find it difficult to employ staff with technology expertise and to purchase state of the art information and communication technology. Even within these rather formidable constraints, many of these organizations manage to create impressive technology arsenals. These can be highly wired organizations that address issues through a skillful use of the latest technology. At least some organizations operate entirely through technology, such as the American advocacy organization Move On

[2] There are some larger organizations in the sample but the overwhelming majority is small organizations with limited staff and modest amounts of financial resources.

(www.moveon.org). In many ways, technology can overcome many of the barriers that tradition nonprofits face, but only it is used efficiently.

This state of affairs is probably not an accurate portrayal of the entire advocacy community, however. These barriers, which have been identified here, will lead to a deepening organizational digital divide with regard to advocacy organizations use of electronic advocacy techniques. As conditions continue to evolve, the effectiveness of advocacy organizations will be compromised. The results for vulnerable populations maybe catastrophic as advocates lose their voice on the policy stage.

## Strategies for Overcoming the Divide

There are a number of strategies that can assist advocacy organizations in realizing the potential offered by technology. An approach that addresses only resources or a strategy that addresses knowledge alone will not succeed. What is needed is an expansion of funding for advocacy technology and the creation of support systems that will allow the development of organizational capacities to address technology.

Several interventions are needed to address this problematic situation. These include funding, training, support organizations and the development of best practice research models.

- *Funding:* The most critical need is almost certainly funding for technology (see Blau, 2001; Robertson, 2001). This would help solve the problems of equipment and expertise. One of the principle obstructions to staff expertise is the costs of hiring technology trained workers (Sommerfeld, 2000). While consultants and management support organizations might be helpful in the short run, band aid solutions are not the long term answer to the technology barriers faced by nonprofit advocacy organizations. Unfortunately, funding for advocacy organizations is often problematic. In the United States, foundation and governmental funding for advocacy efforts is often difficult. When such funding is available there are often strings. While the situation is better in other nations, specific funding for advocacy technology may not be the best path. A better solution might be better general funding for nonprofit technology. This would include advocacy under a broader, more politically neutral, umbrella.

- *Training:* Many people enter nonprofit employment from fields that have traditionally not provided exposure to high technology. Programs in areas such as art, theater, social work, counseling and so forth frequently lack content in the area of technology. Even programs

in nonprofit management often lack meaningful technology content (McNutt & Boland, 2002). We cannot be assured that people will enter nonprofit employment with needed competencies in technology. This means that training is essential if existing employees are to use technology effectively. This training might be offered on site or at some site that is accessible to several organizations. Technology education must be part of educational programs in nonprofit management. Still these are just short term solutions to a serious deficit in the expertise set of the nonprofit workforce. The ultimate solution might not be far off. As legions of technologically savvy younger people join the advocacy community and technology prices continue to fall, the problem may solve itself. The maturing of the methodology of electronic advocacy, the addition of content on these new methods into professional curricula and the development of an advocacy culture that embraces technology will also be helpful.

- *Support Organizations:* In addition to training, the development of a base of expertise can be facilitated through organizations and networks that provide ideas, technical and organizational expertise and encouragement to organizations. A wide variety of both nonprofit and commercial systems have developed including local and regional Nonprofit technology assistance providers, "Circuit Rider" nonprofit consultants (Batchilder, 1998), volunteer an national services program and support networks. These providers are a central resource for nonprofit technology in general but are critical for small, underfunded nonprofit advocacy groups. Application service providers, organizations that allow nonprofits to outsource their information technology functions, are another possibility for meeting this need.

- *Best Practices Research:* A final part of this equation is the development of research efforts that will create best or promising practices models for the use of technology by nonprofit advocacy organizations. This research could focus on optimal technology configurations for nonprofit advocacy organizations. This would free organizations from the necessity of creating their own models and would allow the development of a knowledge base on intervention effectiveness.

These approaches can create a support system for nonprofit advocacy organizations as they try to overcome the barriers to technology adoption. This should be a high priority task for the sector because the stakes are high.

## Conclusion

Technology has many gifts to offer nonprofit advocacy organizations in their struggle for social and economic justice. It can make these organizations more effective and more successful in their efforts.

The other side of the equation is not so positive however. We have seen that wired government, devolution and globalization threaten business as usual in the advocacy arena. Devolution and globalization have created a far more diffuse decision making environment for advocacy. Wired government has posed a more direct threat by raising the level of technology sophistication needed to participate effectively in decision making. Taken together, these forces represent a "Perfect Storm" confronting organizations that are unwilling or unable to change. Some organizations will not survive because of a failure to use what technology makes available. This is unfortunate but may be unavoidable as the three forces driving the system develop.

A review of the results of a few studies of advocacy organizations revealed that expertise and expense are the barriers most frequently reported by the organizations in the studied. Overcoming these barriers will require additional funding, training, support organizations and research and development.

In any case, advocates have important new tools available to them in cyberspace. While there are barriers and issues, the successes that progressive organizations have in acquiring and using these technologies will translate into the ability to work for social and economic justice in the years ahead. The choice is still ours but the opportunity is quickly slipping away.

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