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# Nonprofit Organizations' Perceptions and Uses of the Internet

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This research examines how nonprofit organizations perceive and utilize the internet through the framework of Habermas's theory of the public sphere. In seven focus groups across the country, 52 people responsible for creating internet strategy and/or web content for nonprofit organizations participated. Claims of sweeping improvements in democratic participation through the internet were not supported. Almost no organizations utilized the technology for horizontal or vertical flows of communication, data communality, interactivity, or engaged participation. Furthermore, these nonprofit organizations believed the internet offered little democratizing power but paradoxically provided instant credibility. Those making communication decisions overwhelmingly performed in technical rather than strategic roles as they pushed their message out to the public without any regard to feedback or communication strategy. These individuals also believed the corporate model would drive future internet growth, although they rarely trained internet workers. Possible reasons for these findings and implications for nonprofit organizations are discussed.

**Keywords:** *nonprofit; internet; democracy; public sphere; social change*

Nonprofit organizations, with their particular emphasis on advocacy, volunteerism, fund-raising (Johnson 1999), and relationship building, have a unique opportunity to utilize the internet as a democratic, Habermasian public sphere in the way that many early scholars predicted. Before the internet had gained widespread popularity, scholars and populists alike predicted sweeping improvements in democratic participation (Bertelson 1992). With no central control point and the ability for users to produce, receive, and distribute information with government officials almost instantaneously, citizens could now utilize the internet to better participate in the democratic process (Berman and Weitzner 1997; Bacard 1993; Fisher, Margolis, and Resnick 1996; Lunenfeld 1999). Scholars argued that the technology of the internet itself would allow for horizontal and vertical flows of communication (Stromer-Galley 2000), physical connectivity, data communality, interactivity, and ease of use (Flanagin and Metzger 2000). While other media remained one-way, top-down forms of communication (Rucinski 1991), internet users could have the ability to interactively exchange information and participate directly for a relatively low cost

(Bertelson 1992; Coombs 1998), presumably making the system more responsive to those outside of the political sphere (Hacker 1996). Scholars predicted that through the internet, citizens could participate in a direct, deliberative democracy (Bertelson 1992), which could resemble a Habermasian public sphere (Habermas 1989). Such an interactive and engaging public sphere would be particularly beneficial to nonprofit organizations that depend on volunteerism and relationship building for survival.

Yet dramatic shifts in democratic participation and involvement clearly have not followed. More than a decade after the World Wide Web exploded onto the technological landscape, voting—the principal civic act—has dropped to only 54.7 percent of the voting-age population in the United States (Public Broadcasting Service 2004), American citizens do not trust governmental institutions (Pew Research Center 1998), there remain no citizen initiatives at the U.S. national level, and unlike earlier claims of a direct democracy (Becker 2001), citizens continue to seek representation from governmental officials. In fact, the advent of new democratic processes because of the internet has not been made clear (Blumler and Gurevitch 2001; Diani 2000).

There are complex and extensive streams of research examining the internet's democratic and participatory capability (e.g., internet commons, radical-counter publics, global autonomist communities). However, much of the research has centered on questions of general access (Dutta-Bergman 2005; Katzman 1974; Lengel 1998; Selwyn 2004; Selwyn, Gorard, and Furlong 2005), content corporatization and commercialization, or universal usage patterns (Dahlberg 2000; Jensen 1997; McChesney 2004; Samoriski 2000; Kelly and Lewis 2001; LaRose, Lin, and Eastin 2003; Leonhirth, Mindich, and Straumanis 1997; Streck 1998). Thus, while there have been critical explorations into the democratic components of the internet, much of the research has centered on general communicative issues and the possibilities of the internet rather than actual uses and perceptions by those who create online content. Furthermore, there are very few studies that have examined the actual presence and performance of nonprofit organizations on the internet (Boeder 2002). Indeed, no research that evaluates perceptions from those who actually create nonprofits' internet strategy or web content could be found. Thus, it remains unknown if those responsible for creating the content actually think that the internet is a purposeful and important tool in creating social change.

The primary purpose of this research is to explore how nonprofit organizations are conceptualizing and using the internet through the theoretical framework of the public sphere, first put forth by Habermas (1984). In doing so, this work asks whether nonprofit organizations—a public sector that could potentially thrive through an expanded democratic and participatory internet—perceive and use the internet principally as a Habermasian public sphere or as a corporate-modeled, economic, instrumental vehicle for fund-raising. This research is built on the supposition that the users, and not technology alone, predicate social change. Therefore, the impressions and perceptions of those who create web content for social change are vitally important in understanding the nascent history of social change through the internet,

the present state of that technology for nonprofit organizations, and the future directions of this continuously burgeoning communication tool. In this research, fifty-two people responsible for creating internet strategy and/or web content for a nonprofit organization participated in seven focus groups across the country to gain a better understanding of how nonprofit organizations perceive and utilize the internet as a tool for social change.

## **Nonprofit Organizations and the Internet**

Nonprofit organizations are inherently diverse no matter the categorization: size, activities, clients, approach, origins, or financial security. Despite this diversity, there appears to be some common characteristics (Spencer 2002). The overwhelming majority of nonprofit organizations are small, community-based groups that heavily rely on volunteers. Nonprofit organizations tend to agree on shared causes and are dedicated to a progressive process of social change for the betterment of themselves and others rather than a strictly financial or consumer-driven business model.

While initially slow to adopt new technologies in the past (Jamieson 2000), nonprofit organizations have increasingly embraced new technological modes of action. The internet now makes possible “a resource that has never been available to nonprofits before now: affordable, direct, interactive access to the public at large” (Civille 1997). The technology allows for an extraordinary opportunity to propel democratic participation (Ess 1996), in which individuals can assert their “ideas, concerns and demands before all others” (Dertouzos 1991). In fact, the technology alone could likely be “a way of revitalizing the open and wide-spread discussions among citizens that feed the roots of democratic society” (Rheingold 1993, 46).

The potential benefits of media exposure for nonprofits are numerous. Media are clearly not the only way that an organization, event, or issue can attain public status (Botan and Taylor 2004). However, the media have been found to be effective in providing information to others (Gandy 1982), offering a form of “knowledge membership” with which the public can engage (Barker-Plummer 1995), allowing organizations to define themselves (Aufderheide 1994), legitimizing burgeoning groups (Gitlin 1980), providing potential avenues of growth for social change organizations, and contributing to the adoption of organizational and group norms (Bandura 1977). Yet many nonprofit organizations have charged that traditional mass media also misrepresent their purpose or polarize their issues. The advent of the internet appeared to correct for these inaccuracies by allowing for organizations to represent themselves and communicate with other individuals and organizations that have similar causes—potentially forming a Habermasian public sphere.

Scholars have argued that through this Habermasian public sphere, organizations could greatly improve their public education, credibility, volunteer recruitment, publicity, advocacy, service delivery, research, and communication via the internet (Landesmann

1995). National nonprofits could communicate with greater ease to their local branches (Barndt 1998). Third sector organizations could also expand training, media relations, community building, knowledge sharing, and opinion sampling (Spencer 2002). Certainly, governmental organizations and businesses with a commercial interest have many of these shared concerns. Yet nonprofit organizations, with their unique focus on advocacy, volunteerism, fund-raising (Johnson 1999), and relationship building, have an opportunity to utilize the internet as a Habermasian public sphere in the way that many early scholars predicted.

### **Dual Perceptions: Habermas Versus Capitalism**

Habermas (1984) argued that there was once a deliberative, vibrant public sphere during the Enlightenment. It was this sphere, Habermas asserted, that helped make parliamentary democracy possible. However, this public sphere collapsed under the weight of a bureaucratic industrial society embedded within state-organized capitalism that dictated control of a commercialized mass media (Kellner 2006). As the media shifted into a consumable product rather than a tool for public discussion, the public sphere began its decline. Habermas argued that as this decline took root in society, individuals began developing consumerist and instrumental substitutes for participatory democracy.

The internet also presented seemingly limitless potential possibilities to stem the tide of consumerism and political apathy in society. As a “new” media, the internet met many of the requirements to regain the public sphere. Scholars argued that if a deliberative democracy was to be rejuvenated, a media system must not only inform the public but also create a space where citizens can debate, deliberate issues, and share their own perspectives (Saco 2002; Haas 2004; Merritt 1998; Rosen 1999). Multiple publics (Fraser 1992), which are generally differentiated by group identities or shared characteristics, such as age, gender, or sexuality (Robbins 1993), must interact with each other if the aim is a functioning democracy (Young 2002). After much debate and deliberation, these interactive public spheres then develop into public opinion. This is where the democratic potential of the endlessly interconnected internet appeared the most apparent (Davis 1998).

Yet the three most promising “emerging categories” of nonprofit web sites put forth by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation were e-commerce shopping or profit sharing, fund-raising and advertising, philanthropy, and donor services (Clohesy and Reis 2000). This hope for financial returns has persisted despite the fact that fund-raising has not proven to be as profitable for the nonprofit industry as many had hoped (Johnson 1999). However, as people become more accustomed to the internet, and if confidence concerning the privacy of donations continues to grow, that fact may change.

In 2001, it was noted that more than half of all internet users shop online (Pew Research Center 2001). This stampede toward commercialism may inevitably influence

the nonprofit sector. McChesney (2000) states that the nonprofit sector has now been “relegated to the distant margins of cyberspace; it is nowhere near the heart of the dominant commercial sector.” This perspective suggests that if nonprofits do not appropriate a commercial perspective, they may find themselves to be an irrelevant irritant on the internet. In examining the conceptions and uses of the internet in the nonprofit sphere, this research argues that a consumerist or instrumental alternative to public action, such as volunteering, networking, knowledge building, and social advocacy, would be a corporate, economic focus on fund-raising.

Habermas’s enduring theory of a deliberative democracy has persisted despite its critics. Many scholars have charged that Habermas overvalued interpersonal communication in relation to mediated deliberation (Page 1996; Schudson 1997; Thompson 1995). That being said, Habermas continues to occupy a “central, if highly contentious, position in contemporary democratic theorizing” (Haas 2004, 178). Given research expounding on the possibilities of a Habermasian public sphere on the internet contrasted with the financial promise of internet fund-raising for nonprofits, this research aims to explore the following research questions:

*Research Question 1:* Do those responsible for the online communication message of nonprofit organizations perceive the internet more as a Habermasian public sphere or as a strategic, economic, corporate tool for communication?

*Research Question 2:* Do those responsible for the online communication messages of nonprofit organizations use the internet as a Habermasian public sphere or as a strategic, economic, corporate tool for communication?

## Method

In total, seven focus group meetings were held across the United States between March and June of 2002. Three meetings took place in Austin, Texas (population in 2000: 456,562), two in San Francisco (population in 2000: 776,733), and two in New York City (population in 2000: 8,008,208). Focus groups were used given that this is a preliminary study meant to explore perceptions and uses rather than to describe or explain in any definitive sense. A secondary reason for using focus groups was to witness the interchange between nonprofit representatives as they work through their own conceptualizations of the internet. Using theoretical saturation as a goal, focus group meetings were added until little new information was obtained (Krueger 1988). In total, sixteen people participated in Austin focus groups. The first and second focus group meetings in Austin consisted of six each, and the third had four attendants. Nineteen people participated in the San Francisco focus groups. The first San Francisco meeting had ten participants, while the second had nine. Finally, seventeen people participated in New York focus groups. The first New York focus group meeting had six, and the final New York group had eleven participants.

Participation from eight to twelve individuals in each focus group session is typically encouraged. While all but one meeting had at least six participants, four of the seven focus group sessions held had fewer than eight individuals in attendance. The one meeting that had only four participants was the result of three individuals sending their apologies at the last minute because of their busy schedules. That being said, the focus groups were extremely lively, and discussion never appeared to wane during the sessions because of the passionate response participants appeared to have toward their work and its application to the internet. The total number of participants was fifty-two, well above what is typically needed for theoretical saturation (Morgan 1997).

The cities of Austin, San Francisco, and New York were selected because they are evenly dispersed geographically across the country; their populations roughly represent small, medium, and large urban cities; and all were among the top ten cities with nonprofit associations in the United States (Taft Group 2002). Cities, as opposed to smaller, rural towns, were used in this study given that nonprofit organizations often find more financial and personnel resources in cities. Therefore, it was assumed that if nonprofit organizations wished to utilize the internet in specific ways, they would likely have more financial opportunity to explore and engage their options in cities. The author served as the moderator, and one assistant was present.

Participants were recruited from two sources: Guidestar, an online national database of nonprofit organizations, and the National Directory of Nonprofit Organizations. E-mail addresses of organizations listed in these two directories were compiled into a master list for the three cities. Respondents received lunch for participating and were told that their input would be anonymous. Samples of job titles from focus group participants are vice president of public education, marketing director, web site contact coordinator, web manager, technology manager, executive director, web master, director of public communication, web site editor, information technology coordinator, communications director, and technology specialist. Again, only those who were responsible for creating internet strategy and/or web content for a nonprofit organization were invited to attend.

The seven categories of nonprofits listed in Guidestar were used as a guide for inclusion: religious organizations; public, societal benefit organizations; international organizations; human services organizations; health organizations; environment and animal organizations; and arts, culture, and humanities organizations. Some examples of organizations represented at the seven focus groups are religious organizations such as the Jewish Community Centers of America and Christians for Fatherhood; public, societal benefit organizations such as E the People.org (an online town hall), Century Foundation for Public Policy (focused on federal election reform and generating social services policy), Democracy Net (a voters guide service), ACLU, League of Women Voters, Black Radical Congress, and Campaigns for People (promotes reforms that restrain the influence of money on state government); international organizations such as Action Without Borders, Center for Third World Organizing, Population Council, and UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural

Organization); human services organizations such as FreeNet (an organization that provides access to the internet for the poor), Sustainable Food Center, Safe Place (an organization for battered women), Family Violence Prevention Fund, United Way, and Urban Housing Assistance Corridor; health organizations such as Guinea Development Foundation (promotes health care for Guinea), Sunrise Center (a mental health center for immigrants), California Physicians Alliance, Engender Health (services surrounding reproductive health), and Project Transitions (provides hospice care for people with HIV); environment and animal organizations such as PetsAlive and Earth Justice; education and research organizations such as the Teachers Education Association and the Institute for Retired Professionals at New School (a campus-based organization for older students); and arts, culture, and humanities organizations such as Voices Lesbian Choral Ensemble, Girl Scouts, Arts, Crafts and Theater Safety, Campfire Organization (creates activities and experiences for girls), and the Bay Area Labor Chorus. While this list is not a comprehensive tally of all organizations that participated, it is indicative of the breadth of input received from all seven focus groups held across the country. Organizations that participated ranged in size from one, such as the Christians for Fatherhood organization, to hundreds, such as Girl Scouts and the United Way. These organizations had services ranging from only a few members to more than 400,000, as was the case of the ACLU.

In keeping with recent focus group research (Goodman 2002), individual statements were coded according to a four-stage constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Each statement from participants was coded into as many categories as possible (Krueger 1988; Lindlof 1995). Following the four-stage comparison method, statements were repeatedly compared with the attributes of each category to integrate categories as much as possible. This process allowed for further unification and the ability to “make some related theoretical sense of each comparison” (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 109).

Focus group interviews followed a loose structure that was often dictated by the direction of discussion. In employing a qualitative methodology, it was possible to obtain open-ended responses that allowed participants to articulate their own perceptions of the success of nonprofit organizations on the web, which could then be compared to researchers’ conceptualizations. Given that web content changes so frequently and that the results reported here are from meetings that took place over four months, conclusions should be viewed as a representation of one particular moment in time.

## **Findings**

### **Questionable Democratizing Power**

Several researchers have asserted that the internet has created a deeper deliberative democracy whereby a Habermasian public sphere can develop (Dahlberg 2000; Abe 1998; Wilhelm 2000). This research suggests that the internet will make citizens



more informed about political, cultural, and social events and thereby more active and engaged in the democratic process (Budge 1996; Nederman, Jones, and Fitzgerald 1998; Tapscott 1996). Indeed, there are literally tens of thousands of virtual communities in cyberspace, “flourishing via e-mail lists, electronic bulletin boards, online chat groups and role-playing domains” (Dahlberg 2001).

Several participants believed that the internet had democratized their cause and many pointed to the global capabilities of the internet. “Without the internet we couldn’t possibly have the international infrastructure that we have now,” said one San Francisco participant. Others supporting the democratizing power of the internet pointed to the ability for transparency, particularly within the organization itself. In Austin, one person said, “We really rely on our intranet more than the internet. I don’t know how much outsiders feel more democracy, but we feel it inside the organization.” A New Yorker said, “The internet is more of a valuable staff tool than it is to reach clients.” Still others in support of the democratic ability of the internet pointed to its inherent ease of access. “The use of the internet, no matter how poor, and we’re as poor as they come, can have some sort of publication where widely available, maybe not great circulation, but can put out something.” Another San Franciscan said, “The most exciting thing about the internet for me is that it is flattening the playing field.”

Yet roughly 60 percent of participants thought that the internet was merely more of the same and that early hopes of democracy on the internet were overstated. In San Francisco, one man summed up the expressed thoughts of many present by saying,

There was this sort of this mythos of the web early on where if you had a web site all of a sudden there was like, the whole world had access to your information where in fact the rules now are well, it’s just like all the big players, like if you’re a big enough player to get your message out there then yeah, people will come to your web site, you know, and it still it comes back to the major media. It’s about money and access.

Another San Francisco participant quickly interjected,

Even within the nonprofit community, when you have \$80,000 to spend you sure as hell can do a lot more than if you have \$5,000. And so, when you’re a corporation and you’ve got a million dollar web budget or whatever it is, you know, there is no way we can compete with that.

In New York, one member stated emphatically that she was not

completely sold on the whole idea that our web site is democratizing our information. Viewers can’t get any more information from us that they couldn’t already get from our paper-based promotional materials. It’s still people who have access to the internet in general who will have access to that information.

At that point, the entire New York group agreed. A San Franciscan said, “Is it really using the internet to its greatest demand? Is it drawing in new communities to bring

them tools that they didn't have before? Is it leading to greater democratization? No." Asking similar rhetorical questions, a New Yorker stated, "Are we changing people's lives? Are we helping people? That stuff is hard to gauge." In San Francisco, one participant argued,

Just keep in mind, why was this technology developed in the first place? It was developed by the military. This was not designed to democratize anything. This was designed to allow for coordinated communication across vast distances by multiple parties. It was not designed for what we want it to do.

### **Following the Corporate Model**

More than half of all internet users shop online (Pew Research Center 2001). This, coupled with the fact that online shoppers are more impulsive than others (Donthu and Garcia 1999), makes the internet fertile ground for electronic commerce. This line between for-profit and nonprofit organizations appears to be blurring when it comes to e-commerce. An examination of corporate web pages found that 82 percent of *Fortune* 500 companies addressed at least one social responsibility issue in their web page while promoting their product (Esrock and Leichty 2000). When it comes to fund-raising, the border between nonprofits and for-profits is by no means fixed (Boeder 2002).

The nonprofit organizations in this study stated emphatically that they were either pursuing or had already established a "corporate model." One woman who identified herself as the marketing director of an Austin nonprofit organization stated flatly that her "directive is to bring the for-profit business model into this sector." Another participant in Austin stated that her organizational directive was to turn the "informational tool of the internet into a marketing tool. We've built our site around business models." A San Franciscan lamented, "I'll see some corporate site that's doing all these things. And I'll be like, I want our nonprofit site to do that." In New York, another participant commented, "What we're doing more and more as an organization, as I'm sure a lot of nonprofits are doing, is getting corporate sponsorships." Although one participant in that group did say that she was skeptical of any corporate involvement in her organization, the remaining participants agreed that this was an inevitable next step in any economic model based on the internet.

In 1999, the estimated volume of fund-raising achieved over the internet was 24 percent of nonprofit funding (Stewart 1999). Only four years later, internet fund-raising increased to 48 percent of total funds raised in the nonprofit sector (Wallace 2004). While the percentage of fund-raising done online has increased, the adherence to a commercial model persists despite little factual support for the efficacy of nonprofit fund-raising or volunteer recruitment (Stewart 1999; Finn 1998).

One New York nonprofit representative agreed that "the things that people were hoping for initially, which was basically money, certainly hasn't been the big—it hasn't sort of helped people in the way they really had been expecting." Another New Yorker said,

A couple years ago, I remember, everybody thought they were going to raise money online and that, sort of hope, finally crashed. Not, in the kind of numbers that people were hoping to, sort of, get. Figuring out what the value is, is, sort of tough.

Another Austin woman, following the nodding heads of agreement from all others in the room said plainly, "We've had no luck on our web site." Indeed, almost no participants found the internet to be financially beneficial. Yet even in the face of economic losses, most nonprofits remained committed to the e-commerce model. In Austin, one woman said that her organization is "pretty excited that they can finally accept donations online." The organization had set up an e-commerce function on their site just more than six months ago. The organization had still not "seen any real benefit from it," but "the fact that it is there" was an "exciting prospect" for the organization.

Many participants admitted to selling goods and services that were once free simply to prove the benefits of the internet to board members and potential donors. In scrambling to find ways to make money on the internet, one New York organization has decided to sell previously free items

simply to prove that the internet has some value. We just really find that we cannot give away that much stuff any more. We've found in this economic environment, people are just going to have to pay a little bit of money for it.

The desperation to raise funds on the internet has led several participants to even consider selling information that was once considered private. As one New York participant said, "We get calls every day from people who want to buy our mailing list. That might be something." Nobody in the focus group refuted this possibility.

This adherence to corporate dollars also persists even though the majority of participants found the growing corporate presence on the internet dismaying. As one San Francisco woman stated,

[The internet] became so horribly commercialized. I mean some of it was cool, but on the other hand, I find it extremely annoying that any time I go onto a search engine, I have to close down at least two advertisements before I can do what I want to do. And, to me really, that gets in the way of the social change power of the tool.

Some research shows that for-profit organizations are implementing e-commerce at a rapid pace (Boeder 2002). Yet other research finds that corporate pages do not use the technology to its fullest potential, and only 15.9 percent of *Fortune* 500 companies used the web for financial transactions (Esrock and Leichty 1998; Aikat 2000). Nonprofit participants in this study fully believed that the corporate world had established a burgeoning web-based sales process, and they were determined to follow. As one New York man said, "Commercial organizations have invested so much in keeping in touch with me. What can we learn from the other side of the fence?"

## **One-way Information Dissemination**

All discussion may not meet Schudson's (1997) guidelines for democracy (rule-governed, public, civil, yet uncomfortable discourse oriented toward problem solving) nor allow for outside interests to enter debate (Streck 1998). Yet the internet has the possibility to allow citizens to problem solve complicated issues and for non-elites to negotiate multiple views of reality (Leonhirth, Mindich, and Straumanis 1997). While the debate on democratic levels of internet discourse continues, this research found that all of the focus group participants rarely or never used the interactive functions of the internet. The overwhelming majority of participants in this research, roughly 90 percent, saw the internet principally as a tool for information dissemination. Echoing previous research that has found very little discursive, interactive communication (Tsaliki 2003), these focus group participants stated that having information available on the web was their organizations' primary concern.

While all of the participants knew of the possibilities inherent in the internet, most kept their web presence basic. One participant characterized her organization's web presence as "static information only. Very blah." Another participant said, "We use the internet to push our information out to as many people as possible. Pure and simple." Research has found that many nonprofit web sites receive the same information via the internet that they could have received if they approached the organization with a request for printed information (DiGrazia 2000). One participant stated succinctly, "All the information we have the web, you could get ten different places."

The reliance on information dissemination was overwhelmingly viewed as positive, although most had basic knowledge of the technological capabilities of the internet. As one Austin woman said, "90 percent of new members joined my organization during one legislative session because of what they learned online." This information learned was clearly central for how these nonprofit organizations viewed their growth via the internet. The central tenet of the organizations that participated in this focus group was to get information out to the public. While many saw future possibilities of interactive communication through the internet, most cited a lack of resources for immediate implementation. One participant stated, "Our people are so far maxed out that the addition of an internet conversation piece, I think, would just be too much right now."

## **Lack of Strategy**

While some research has found that nonprofits must continuously examine the changing needs of society and constantly redesign their organizational structure accordingly (Perlmutter and Gummer 1994), only very few of the participants mentioned even a passing knowledge of organizational strategy or societal needs. There appeared to be a huge disconnect between those responsible for the organization's internet presence and strategic implementation of any stated or implicit goals. As one

participant in New York said, “People just sort of, got together, and had a beer and said we should do [a web page].” Another participant said, “We can’t even figure out what is or is not relevant on our web page.” In San Francisco, one participant commented, “The maintenance of our web page appears to be the end objective.”

There appeared to be very little explicit conceptions of strategy that permeated throughout these nonprofit organizations. In New York, one woman said that her organization has not

institutionally changed to make people think about the internet holistically. They are not staffed up for it. People will tell me that we don’t have the staffing to give you what you want. And, I’m like, what I want? I’m trying to help disseminate your research. So there is this mindset that I think has not been integrated well into our organization and this is universal.

Most stated clearly that they had no conception of who visited their web page or why. As one participant said, “Even if we know who our audience is, in terms of your mission, evaluation is a big thing that we can’t figure out through the web.” Most participants clearly wanted to have a better grasp on usage patterns. In New York, one man said, “I want to know where people are coming from and why. But, there’s no meaningful way for me to get there now.” Many noted that if they had a strategic vision, it was for internal purposes. As one New Yorker said,

I think when our web site was first developed, it was developed more from our perspective out, rather than the reader’s perspective in. And, so, when you look at our site, you kind of have to know how we are structured to find anything.

The exceptions to this majority appeared inspiring to the rest of the participants. One woman in New York said,

We have a group that focuses just on what the web site will, can and will be doing. It gives us an opportunity to be a bit more forward thinking about what goes on up there and about how we can present ourselves to our internet audience.

To that, several in the group shared their admiration for instilling this kind of organizational leadership. In another focus group, the lone participant who claimed to have strong strategic focus within the organization said,

We really needed to change the way that we thought about communication and integrate it into everything we do. Once we did that, it worked. It was really a top down effort and a lot of side by side persuasion and negotiation.

Immediately afterward, another participant said, “God, I wish we could do that.”

## Lack of Training

As of June 2000, the internet economy directly employed more than three million workers in the United States (University of Texas 2001). However this number measures only those who work in for-profit corporations, either for young, web-centric companies or for traditional industrial and service firms that are just beginning to integrate the internet into their business strategy (SpencerStuart 1999; Marschall 2002). To date, there has been no measurement of internet workers' employment in the nonprofit field.

Measuring new media employment is difficult because of the flexible nature of information age work in which those responsible for managing and strategizing new media content must update their skills and job titles constantly (Castells 1996; Sennett 1998; Webster 1995). Indeed, "new media workers, in particular, exemplify this kind of flexibility, facing job insecurity in contract-based service work, variable work schedules, and constant readjustment to the new, digital technology" (Kotamraju 2002, 24).

The nonprofits participating in this study clearly saw the disconnect between training and progress. One participant said, "We absolutely need training. If we want it global, we need it." However, while the recognition of this disconnect exists, the funding for these positions does not. In Austin, a woman stated flatly, "We're not giving anybody any kind of training for technology." All of the participants in that focus group meeting agreed, saying, "It's just not in the budget." Most agreed with one San Franciscan's statement that she had "so many more plans in [her] head than [she was] able to execute." Another participant said, "We'd like more bells and whistles in terms of graphics and things like that. We just don't have anybody to do it."

In fact, the overwhelming finding through these focus group meetings was that all those responsible for designing and maintaining their web pages had absolutely no training or experience. As one participant said, "I'm the web master because I sit closest to the biggest computer we have." Another commented that, "I'm involved in everything from which fax machine is best for our organization to building web pages and stuff." Another participant stated flatly, "We have absolutely no training, and we're in charge of doing this stuff." One organization representative said, "It seems like, you know, the youngest person in the organization is always responsible for the web site." To this statement, another replied, "Unfortunately, we are leaving some of our most sophisticated leads to some of the most unsophisticated people."

Nonprofit organizations appear to dispatch much of their information technology work to volunteers (Burt and Taylor 2001), primarily because qualified IT professionals usually can demand higher salaries in the private sector. However, when nonprofits are not fortunate enough to locate volunteers with that important information technology skill set, most simply remain ambivalent toward technology adoption (Tsaliki 2003). An Austin woman said that her organization finally made much needed changes on the web site, "only because an advertising agency volunteered to redesign our web site. Nobody in house could do it." Yet farming out technical expertise has huge costs

according to many of the participants. Nonprofits often find themselves in what one participant called “the hell of someone making something and no one else can support it.” In Austin, the communications director of one organization said that “we’ve had volunteers come in and update [the organization web site], but it hasn’t really worked out really well. It ends up falling on the shoulders of one poor, unfortunate person who knows vaguely how to do it.”

### **Instant Credibility**

Some research has found credibility on the internet has dropped because of a lack of professional standards (Finberg and Stone 2002), a dearth of editorial gatekeeping (Flanagin and Metzger 2000), widespread attempts to parody official sources online (Shenk 1997; Whillock 1997), the propensity to rush deadlines on a 24-hour web clock (Brill 2001), the possibility of linking to other pages that may contain errors (Nadarajan and Ang 1999), and the simple fact that users are more accustomed to reading contextual cues of credibility from traditional media (Newhagen and Levy 1997). However, a remaining vestige of apparent credibility for nonprofit sites in particular is reflected in a recent survey of journalists that found they relied more on nonprofit web sites than business sites for credible information (Dollarhide 1999).

Focus group participants seemed unaware of any plunging credibility gap on the internet. In Austin, one focus group participant said, “It’s a tool of credibility. Whether there is something on that web page or not, it probably wouldn’t even matter. If you have a URL, [potential funders] are interested.” As one woman, responsible for her organization’s web site stated, the purpose of our web site is “just there to find us. It makes us look good.”

Even when many questioned the accuracy of the internet, the fundamental credibility was unwavering. As one San Franciscan said, “The problem of sending information via the internet and all of that, is that we don’t always know the accuracy of it. We assume that it’s accurate but it’s not.” Asked how do you build credibility, the same San Franciscan answered, “Consistent information, and just being there.” This was echoed by an Austin participant who said, “You are almost not legitimate unless you have [a web site].” Indeed, there appears to be a widespread assumption that every organization simply must have a web presence, regardless of the content that it holds. Given this absolutist approach to participating on the web, many in these focus groups have come to regret the amount of work that the web has added to their already pressured lives. In reporting to a board of doctors for a health nonprofit organization, one participant found that board members think

because the web exists, because computers are fun and cool, we have to do everything using the web and computers. Every document we produce has to be in an index that’s on the web. Every event that we have has to have a web forum discussion. Even though these members have no interest in it, it’s the thing that we should be doing.

Another participant in San Francisco stated that he spends a big portion of his time constantly questioning,

Do we really need to do this? All this work to create a web forum, for example. Are we going to have a single person there? Once you have the skills the issue is no longer what can you do, but what should you do. Unfortunately, everyone I work with says do it if you can do it, it makes us look better.

## Unlocated Value

One of the great dilemmas of the information age is for free-flowing information to maintain its value as it moves (Rogerson 2003). Yet the overwhelming majority of focus group participants, while still viewing the medium itself as credible, found that they simply could not place a specific value on the internet, nor quantify how the internet has helped their nonprofit organization. In New York, one man stated plainly, "Nobody's quite sure how to demonstrate the value of the internet. If somebody downloads 1,000 reports, is that good? Or if you have 10,000 visitors come up, is that good? I don't know." Similarly stated, an Austinite said, "Yes, you've gotten 10 hits in one day for potential volunteers. Is that 10 out of 10 or 10 out of 10,000?"

Many felt that they were continuously busy reinventing old modes of communication and simply repeating content. A web designer in Austin argued, "You just feel like we could do a better job of capturing the knowledge base because people keep asking the same questions." To that, a roomful of participants agreed. Echoing the concerns of others in the room, a New Yorker said, "The whole idea that if we have a web site, people will find us. There's a billion web sites out there and people finding you just because you have one. It's just really hard to make this work." In New York another participant said, "I don't really think that . . . the web has been really helpful to an organization like mine." In San Francisco, one participant said, "I don't know what to make of all this. I'm not sure what the internet has done."

Not everyone agreed with the perspective that the internet had minimal value. One Austin man stated plainly,

It is absolutely indispensable to the area I'm in. We are both a service and an advocacy organization. [Our] issues are basically frozen out of the media. The only place where the message that we have to give can get out to the public without being filtered through the media is the internet. There are enormous resources on the internet that you can't find anywhere else.

Yet roughly 90 percent of participants found great fault with the performance of the internet thus far. As this exposed discontent continued to rise throughout discussions, some participants stated absolute disappointment with the internet. In Austin, one woman said, "I guess the internet can be an effective tool. It has not been yet for us, for our cause."



After all of this largely negative discussion, each participant was asked if he or she would prefer to return to the early nineties when the internet was not widely used. Not one participant thought that this would be a beneficial alternative. As one participant said, “I don’t know how people did it before the technology.” And all echoed one participant’s statement that “I don’t know what we would do without it.”

## Discussion

This research found that claims of sweeping improvements in democratic participation through the internet have not been supported. While the participants in these focus groups clearly understood the potential capability of the internet, almost none utilized the technology for horizontal and vertical flows of communication, data communality, interactivity, or engaged participation. Yet participants were keenly interested in pursuing a corporate model. This insistence on an e-commerce framework continued without any strong support that the e-commerce model has worked in for-profit businesses. Seen as an inevitable next step in the internet evolution, participants stated emphatically that they were either pursuing or had already established a “corporate model”—even when organizational fund-raising efforts had thus far proven unsuccessful. As others have argued (Contractor and Eisenberg 1990; Flanagan 2000), this inexorable move toward a corporate model may be based on nothing more than perceived social pressures. However, given that almost all of the nonprofits were struggling to economically maintain their web presence, this sense of inevitability may be well founded for purely financial reasons. Yet it is disheartening to see this trend developing, which many participants found disturbing themselves, merely to prove that the internet has some financial benefit.

Scholarly projections of a deliberative democracy online have not materialized, according to these participants. Those participating in this study did not appear to recognize any form of publics online that were communicating with one another with any frequency or depth. Most argued that the internet, like other media, remains a contentious battleground over access. Citing their continued difficulty in reaching actual clients, participants argued that the internet is largely redundant in its efforts to communicate with the public. This lack of faith or interest in the internet as a public sphere is disturbing when one contextualizes the nonprofit sector in relation to their particular emphasis on relationship building, advocacy, volunteerism, and fund-raising. If, at least, a vision of the internet as a public sphere is not apparent in the nonprofit sector, one questions if it has any viability at all online.

The first research question asked if those responsible for the online communication message of nonprofit organizations perceived the internet more as a Habermasian public sphere or through the lens of a corporate model of communication. The strong criticism of the internet as a tool for democracy found in this research, matched with a pronounced curiosity toward the commercial possibilities of the internet appears to

suggest that those responsible for the online communication message of nonprofit organizations viewed the internet in the mold of a corporate model of communication rather than a democratic, Habermasian public sphere. That being said, participants appeared very willing to utilize any model or theory of communication that would result in an economic return. This twist on Habermas's theory of a public sphere is particularly ironic given that Habermas himself lamented the downfall of the public sphere as a result of the rising corporate sector. This research questions whether Habermas's theory needs to be revisited in relation to nonprofit organizations and their desperate desire to attract financial returns. Indeed, with the rising corporatization of the internet, one has to wonder if the only avenue for an online public sphere in the modern, corporatized digital era is squarely within a corporate, economic context.

The second research question asked if those responsible for the online communication message of nonprofit organizations use the internet as a Habermasian public sphere or as a strategic, economic, corporate tool for communication. This research found that nonprofit organizations are not actually using the internet as either a Habermasian public sphere or as a strategic, economic, corporate tool for communication. The emphasis on a one-way model of communication without regard to interpretation, monitoring information, or feedback suggests that the preponderance of participants in this focus group research functioned with no strategic goal whatsoever. Rather, participants seemed focused simply on "getting the message out" without any strategic vision as to what the message actually said, who actually received that message, or the efficacy of the message.

Participants believed strongly that utilizing the internet offers the benefit of instant credibility. While the research is decidedly mixed on this issue, focus group participants unanimously agreed that their organization is seen as more credible simply by having a web page. Given participants' unwavering dedication to the perceived credibility gained from an internet presence, it was surprising that most struggled with an inability to measure any value of the internet. This juxtaposition between credibility and value could be explained by an inherent technological ambiguity that leaves financially strapped nonprofit organizations somewhat confused. Thus, their adoption of internet technologies, without full understanding of its capabilities, may indeed be the result of external social pressures.

Pointing to further inconsistencies, very few nonprofit organizations invested in any internet training, perhaps because of their perception that the internet does not have any value. Yet nonprofits present for these focus groups were also keenly aware that their inactivity would likely stall their future growth. They all apparently saw future value in the internet but maintained that their present needs were far too great to make a web investment. Again, it appears that this disconnect may be because of the inability of nonprofits to place value on the internet itself but the fear that the internet is having some benefit somewhere that might be able to applied to the nonprofit sector in the future.

Research has found that interactive, personalized one-to-one relationships and a continuously reexamined strategic plan are the cornerstones to successful internet growth. Yet the overwhelming majority of nonprofit organizations in this study rarely or never used the interactive functions of the internet, nor considered any cohesive internet strategy. Rather, they saw the internet principally as a tool for information dissemination and internal efficacy. Indeed, many felt pride that the same information could be located through several different methods and that the internet was used principally as a tool for internal communication. With little regard to strategic networking, the capabilities of the internet were rarely examined or pursued. Nonprofit organizations appeared to be using the technology to enhance routine administrative and operational efficacy rather than strategic applications. Future research should examine how and why the dissemination of information has become the principal goal for these social change organizations.

While these findings cannot be generalizable to all nonprofit organizations, these focus group sessions illustrate two fundamental inconsistencies. The first contrast is between the scholarly view of the internet as a participatory, democratic sphere and nonprofits' perceptions of the internet as a corporate tool for fund-raising. This inconsistency is troubling given that nonprofit organizations would be the most likely online group—with their emphasis on volunteering, networking, knowledge building, and social advocacy—to utilize the democratic and participatory functions of the internet. This inconsistency brings into question whether Habermas' theory of a public sphere truly has any bearing on how nonprofit organizations communicate. This inconsistency also suggests that much more research that examines the practical limitations and aspirations of those who actually use the internet must be done.

The second contrast found here was within communication decision makers, who functioned in a technical role without attention to media communication strategy yet desperately hoped to realize their perception of the internet as a corporate tool for fund-raising. This presents a complicated and potentially frustrated nonprofit sector. Without any strategic interpretation of their internet activity, nonprofits appear to be spiraling in search of online meaning and purpose.

This research found that nonprofits engage the internet through a haphazard, non-strategic, and undemocratic mode of communication with the firm hope of an amorphous economic return in the future from a public that has not been even remotely conceptualized. Indeed, nonprofits appear to engage the internet without any vision of a public at all. Rather, they view the internet as a portal for information that they themselves can use but one that does not serve interactive communication. This research points to a self-reflexive mirrored theory of "communication" that bears no resemblance to traditional theories of communication, which consider a sender and receiver as equal participants within an engaged public sphere.

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