
Information Technologies for Grassroots Groups *

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Abstract

This is a first try of a research proposal to investigate the use of ITs by grassroots groups. I first argue that grassroots groups, because they are the channel through which citizens can get their voices heard outside of the traditional political system, are a key element of direct “bottom-up” democracy. Second, I propose a very brief outline of a literature review on the subject (obviously, if we decide to go ahead this will need to be expanded- and we may do that as a group). Third, I state the research questions. Fourth, I summarize some evidence about the access of grassroots groups to IT which suggests that IT may indeed make them more effective. And fifth, I describe the proposed study (as I see it now - and this will change as we discuss it).

1. The context

The importance of grassroots groups for democracy Civil society, as the domain of civil rights and freedom as guaranteed and protected by the state, or as the political realm of society, refers in the U.S. mostly to political associations; and social movements, the keystone of bottom-up political action in the U.S., are the embodiment of civil society at work. Grassroots groups create social movements on a large or local scales. They are the channel through which citizens can directly affect decision-making processes without relying on the elected representatives, often (and by essence) non-responsive to minorities’ interests. Citizens usually do not participate in political decision-making processes as individuals, but rather as members of more or less formal citizens groups.

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Despite the alleged current 'apathy' of citizens, private citizens organize in some instances into grassroots groups and build up movements to shape political decision-making processes, especially at the local level. Grassroots groups are the main (and maybe the most legitimate because they are by definition 'bottom-up organizations') representation of civil society in the US. They often represent local communities in political processes when elected officials fail to do so.

Tocqueville was impressed by the impulse he found among Americans to organize in grassroots associations around any number of causes and interests limited in scope. This would still impress him today, since there are tens of thousands of local and national associations in the U.S., who attempt promote direct participatory democracy through civil-rights type struggles.

II. Literature

Since grassroots groups and organizations are a key element of democracy, it is essential to understand how they are, and can be more, effective in their actions. Some groups are more effective (or successful?) than others, and this difference needs to be explained for the benefit of the least successful ones.

Many texts have been published about the potential of ITs to increase (or promote?) direct democracy. Some argue that IT can be empowering as the information-poor potentially become information- rich, and as increases in communication and contacts between people potentially widens expectations of a more participatory democracy (Williams and Pavlik, 1994). Others see IT as a tool for restoring a sense in local community vitality. For Barber, ITs have a great potential for democratic discourse because they can be used to guarantee equal access to information, tying individuals and institutions into networks that make discussion and debate possible (Barber, 1988).

Finally, new modes of communication may also have the potential to change the traditional political processes and to create alternative institutions to challenge the status quo (Perelman, 1998). Perelman, however, seems pessimistic as he writes: " alas, I do not see any evidence that such developments represent a substantial threat to the corporate dominance of capitalist societies" (Michael Perelman,1998 p.11). One of the main reasons why IT may not increase citizens participation and democracy is the issue of

access to IT, and therefore of access to information. Pavlik emphasizes the importance of increasing the access of the poor to IT because "Numerous studies have demonstrated that increases in the flow of information often widen the gap between the rich and the poor" (Pavlik in Williams, 1994, p.144)

The main practical issues represented in the literature about the role of IT for increasing democracy are issues of access to information and IT and the ability to use IT. Children and adults from poor households are less likely to have access to computers (and thus to access information) than persons from middle-class and wealthy ones. Furthermore, specific training and skills are necessary to use IT, and wealthy and middle class individuals are more likely to develop the appropriate skills than the poor (Michael Perelman, 1998, p.11). This gap is reinforced by the fact that rich and middle class children are more likely to go to schools that provide hands-on computer training and Internet access than children from poor neighborhoods (Schiller, 1995).

Since grassroots groups are the key to a more direct democracy, it is essential to understand how they, as social groups, access and use information and its. James Madison wrote in 1822 that "A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives" (James Madison, 1822, cited in Sussman, 1997).

If this is true, then the access to and use of IT by citizens groups would be crucial. Social activists have developed projects to empower communities by providing them computer access. Efforts in this direction have been made in a few American cities: Santa Monica, Glendale, and Pasadena in California, where online systems for public use have been set up. However, there seems to be no breakthrough in altering the imbalance of access to information and knowledge (Sussman, 1997).

Despite these documented efforts, the literature on the role of IT in democratic processes fails to explain how ITs are practically used to increase the effectiveness of citizens groups, and ultimately to enhance democracy.

III. The question

The research question is thus: How much access do grassroots groups have to IT and information? How much and how do they use IT to increase the effectiveness of their actions? And finally, does the use of IT ultimately increase their effectiveness?

IV. Evidence : preliminary work

There is very little evidence about groups' use of ITs to further their goals.

A preliminary study of Environmental Justice grassroots groups in North Carolina (Laurian, 1999) described the use of IT by twelve groups which could be contacted by phone and interviewed about their use of computers, and email and the Internet in particular. The use of IT by these grassroots groups is extremely variable.

Six out of the twelve groups do not use computers on a regular basis, and the other half does. Among the groups who never or very seldom use computers, the main reasons given were, as expected, lack of skills and lack of access. Six out of the twelve groups do not use email on a regular basis (for daily communications), and six do. Without judgment as to whether half is a large proportion or not, this indicates that email has become a widespread and useful tool to grassroots groups.

In terms of Internet use, six groups use the Internet a lot, four use it sometimes, and two groups never access the web. Of the ten groups who use the Internet at least sometime, six groups use the Internet only to get information, and four groups use the Internet to obtain information and to put information out (including through a web page).

Examples given of Internet use were: to get information on available grants, to obtain precise information about the effects of pollution on health, and to get statistical data in a GIS mappable format to show trends in environmental injustice. The Internet has also proved to be useful to some groups mostly as a way of accessing information (only one third of the groups also use it to share information).

These results were contrasted with the use of IT by a student group (with unlimited access to Its and the appropriate skills), which showed how, when IT is available and used, it can increase effectiveness of mobilization. During a “civil-rights-style” student protest (with marches and sit in, etc.), students made intensive and imaginative use of IT. This indicates how IT can be used in social movements. This group used IT to enhance the effectiveness its actions in various ways:

(1) To facilitate media outreach. Press releases were sent out to local TV and radio stations and to local, regional and national newspapers sometimes several times a day by email and fax.

(2) To gather support from local and national personalities. The Internet, email, phones and faxes were used to contact elected representatives and personalities. The support of a local House Representative and of Noam Chomsky had a very significant impact for the group morale (and sense of pride) and for the group’s credibility.

(3) To network, and establish and maintain contacts within a broader network of groups going through, or having gone through, similar struggles.

(4) To keep the network of groups informed about progress of their struggle, the groups’ web page was updated after every significant event.

(5) To widely publicize the event. The sit-in was broadcasted over the web in real time via a web camera.

(6) To avoid isolation during the sit-in. To avoid relying on phone lines which could be cut, cellular phones were used.

While this is anecdotal evidence, it indicates that IT can enhance the effectiveness of grassroots groups actions by facilitating publicity, media outreach, networking efforts, and to gather support for the group and keep other groups and individuals informed.

It follows that since networking among groups is done both by mail, phone, and email, groups who never use email may be at a disadvantage in terms of contacts and potential support by other groups.

Furthermore, lack of frequent access to the Internet may put a group at a disadvantage. There are many programs to support grassroots mobilization efforts, and eventually to increase their access to IT. These include grants from private foundations as well as government programs.

However, when the government provides a service that can enhance mobilization capacity and/or access to IT, most of the information about these resources is announced via the Internet. Groups who use the Internet do benefit from these resources. Groups who don't use the Internet must rely on mailed documentation, which is sent to large groups, but often does not reach local groups. Groups who don't have access to the Internet won't necessarily know about these opportunities. This may mean that groups which have access to IT and use it will receive more support from the government and non-profit organizations, will have access to more information and advice with regard to strategy, and may be more effective in their mobilization efforts.

The proposed research will test these hypotheses.

V. The proposed study

1) Objectives

1. To assess the access of grassroots groups to IT (and the channels of this access)
2. To compare the effectiveness of grassroots which use IT with the effectiveness of those that don't use IT.
3. To compare the use of IT (how much and how they use IT) by grassroots with use of IT by larger (more established) groups.
4. To compare how the use of IT has changed or increased the efficacy of actions for grassroots and large groups.

2) Methodology

The research would use a mail survey (with follow-up phone calls to gather the information from those who didn't reply).

The research would use two survey samples (one of grassroots groups and one of larger groups).

I here proposed two kinds of groups, and the potential sampling frames for each.

- Grassroots groups: Environmental Justice groups
Grassroots Environmental Justice groups are local political grassroots groups which usually encompass environmental justice goals, sometimes including racial and social justice as broader goals. The survey sample frame can be composed of the groups (or a subset of the groups) listed in "1994-95 People of Color Environmental Groups Directory," which is being updated currently for 1999. This directory is compiled by Dr. Robert Bullard at the Environmental Justice Resource Center (Clark Atlanta University), and includes listings for over 200 people of color organizations nationwide, in Canada and Mexico.

- Large groups: well established environmental groups
The sample frame can be composed of large (well established) state and national level environmental groups based on Internet search (we would be assuming they have a web page).

3) Scale

This survey would be a nationally representative survey of grassroots and large groups in the US.

It may also involve some international comparison.

4) Issues of interest

This section provides examples of the issues to be addressed and questions which could be asked.

Access to computers:

- Does the group have access to computer(s)? - How does the group have access to computer(s) : computer belongs to the group and is in the group's office, computer belongs to the group and is in a member's home, private computer of a group member, group member(s) use computer at work, group members use computer in a public library, group member or relative of group member access computer at school or university... - How often do group members use computer for group's activities?

Use of common software:

- Frequency of the use of computers for Word processing - Purpose of the use of word processing (e.g., flyers, letters, type petitions...)
- Use of accounting system for group accounting/ treasury

Use of email:

- Does the group use email for daily routine tasks? (e.g., communication between group members about meetings) - Does the group use email to communicate with other groups? - Does the group use email to influence decision-making processes? (e.g., email the senator...)
- Does the group use email as an action-tool? (e.g., swamp an elected representative's email)

Use of the Internet:

- Does the group have a web page?
- Does the group use the Internet to share information with other groups or individuals outside the group ? (e.g., through the web page, through discussion groups)
- Does the group use the Internet to get information about the issue it deals with? (to document the issue)
- Does the group use the Internet to get information about potential resources? (grants, funding)
- What are the resources that the group accessed through the Internet? Data provided by local/ State/ federal government, Information provided by other groups, information provided in the media, grants provided by local/ State/ federal government, support and strategy ideas provided by other groups etc...

Actions with and without IT:

- Use of the phone for actions (calling elected official) - Use of the mail for action (sending letters, postcards to elected officials)
- Use of civil-rights type action (marches, civil disobedience, rallies...)

Uses of IT:

- For publicity
- For media outreach
- In networking efforts (horizontal networking with other groups in the same situation, vertical networking with regional or national groups)

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- To gather support for the group
 - To keep other groups and individuals informed. - To get grants or support from foundations and government programs

Perceptions of how IT affects effectiveness:

- What are the most effective actions the group has undertaken? Did they involve use of IT? How?
- How does group use IT to be more effective? - Has it made a difference?
- What are the group's plans in the future in terms of use of IT?

VI. Wrapping up

With all the limitations of a first take, there is plenty of room to discuss and revise all this, but I think this will make this potential research project more concrete to all of us.

VII. References

(Williams and Pavlik, 1994).

(Barber, 1988).

(Perelman, 1998).

(Michael Perelman, 1998)

(Schiller, 1995).

(James Madison, 1822)

(Sussman, 1997).

(Laurian, 1999)