The Internet and Democratic Participation: Uses of ICTs by Voluntary and Community Organisations in Ireland

BRIAN TRENCH

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Abstract: This paper explores the implications of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) for community and voluntary sector organisations in Ireland and reports on the initial findings of the authors' research project: “The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age”. The point of departure for the research project is a conception of society in which citizen organisations play a significant role, citizenship is expressed actively and levels and modes of public participation define a democracy. The project seeks to explore how certain implementations of ICTs could enhance and expand democratic practices by strengthening existing and developing networks of voluntary and community organisations, making their work practices and their negotiations with established powers more effective. The project’s findings so far suggest that Irish voluntary and community organisations have experienced substantial difficulties in developing such applications or in realising the real or imagined benefits to them of using ICTs more extensively. A range of financial, technical, organisational and cultural factors have influenced — and, notably, inhibited — the adoption of newer ICTs in the voluntary and community sector, in a manner, or to an extent, which may affect that sector's participation in the wider society.

I CONSTRUCTING THE SOCIETY IN INFORMATION SOCIETY

Over a period of about three years, the “information society” has become a popular term in academic discourse, official reports and technologists' prognostications to refer, in aggregate, to the effects of the widespread use of digital information and communication technologies. Previously, terms such
as "information age" and "information economy" were also commonly used. The shift in language invites us to consider the social content of the concept, "information society".

The most influential perspectives in the public and political discourse on this topic are those of the information technology industry, and in that perspective the "society" in "information society" is usually synonymous with the market. Microsoft founder Bill Gates's vision of the networked future is constructed largely around companies and homes, comprising the "ultimate market" (1996, p.6) without intermediaries. In modified versions of this view, "society" is presented as commensurate with households and schools and the government-citizen relationship is presented in terms of more efficient delivery of information-based public services.

Many textbooks and readers on the "information society" follow this subdivision of society. Thus, a standard reader, Information Technology and Society, consists centrally of parts labelled, IT in the Workplace, IT and Learning, IT and the Home (Heap, 1995) A similar model informs many governmental reports on the "information society", including Information Society Ireland (1997), in which the main emphasis is on economic competitiveness or national "preparedness", that is, on the need for nation-states to apply information and communication technologies (ICTs) as comprehensively as possible in order to secure their position in their respective markets. Such reports typically construct the social dimension of the "information society" as an agglomeration of market, employment, households, schools and public services.

In some political statements on the "information society" concern is expressed about the development of a gap between "information-rich" and "information-poor". This is frequently overlaid on a national competitiveness perspective, expressing awareness of "the possibility that, within the first world, we could also see a two-tier society of have and have-nots. Possession of the most elementary computer, a modem and telephone require a minimum financial outlay of 1,000 ECUs (or IR£800). But even this modest quantum of expenditure is beyond the reach of many families, who are increasingly at risk of becoming information have-nots" (Rabbitte, 1996). This concern influences proposals to "use fiscal incentives to encourage ... households to acquire PCs/information appliances and deploy access technology at convenient points in local communities" (Information Society Ireland, 1996, p. vi).

Some influential views of the "information society" represent future social or civic action as electronic direct democracy in which the key relationships are those between individual consumer-citizens and central and local powers, with the citizens being more directly involved in decision-making through
electronic referenda. Alvin Toffler (Kelly, 1996, p. 54) sees that new technology can be used in a combination of such direct democracy and established representative democracy “to take advantage of both ... We call this semidirect democracy”.

These views have been sketched here in order to suggest that the “society” in “information society” has come to be seen primarily in the form of individualised consumers, either of goods and services sold in the marketplace or of government and other public services, or as employees who experience technological change. A point of departure for the research project, “The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age,” in which the present writers are engaged, is an understanding of society in which citizen organisations play a significant role, citizenship is expressed actively and levels and modes of public participation define a democracy. It was hypothesised that certain implementations of ICTs could enhance and expand democratic practices by strengthening existing and developing networks of voluntary and community organisations, making their work practices and their negotiations with established powers more effective. It was further considered that the voluntarist and community development ethos, with its emphasis on sharing and solidarity, might prove especially amenable to certain manifestations of the Internet, as a set of information and communications technologies which evolved, until recently, around concepts of information exchange.

International experience supported this approach: non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have demonstrated creatively the possible application of Internet technologies to developing or reinforcing networks for political action and information. Mattelart (1996, p. 117) sees NGOs as sharing practising global communications which represent an aspiration to “another type of world space” from that of the major multimedia conglomerates. Frederick (1993) believes the Internet can be used to co-ordinate the worldwide network of non-governmental organisations and citizen advocacy groups. Internet-based networks may be having an impact on international relations, for example by supporting activists in Tianenmen Square, carrying uncensored news reports from the Gulf War, and building a broad-based coalition of organisations opposed to the North American Free Trade Agreement.

As will be seen from the findings of the survey work and participatory research reported below, Irish voluntary and community organisations have experienced substantial difficulties in developing such applications or in realising the real or imagined benefits to them of using ICTs more extensively. Our research suggests that a range of financial, technical, organisational and cultural factors have influenced — and, notably, inhibited — the adoption of newer ICTs in the voluntary and community sector, in a
manner, or to an extent, which may affect that sector's participation in the wider society. To be taken seriously by prospective funders in the business sector or to be treated by government as a worthy "social partner", may be increasingly related to the ability to use certain applications of ICTs.

II THE IRISH VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

Many hundreds of thousands of individual members of Irish society express their belonging to that society through membership of and participation in residents', workplace, trade union, professional, cultural, sporting, social action, political, and other organisations. The Irish voluntary and community sector comprises hundreds of charities and national organisations with budgets of more than £1 million as well as thousands of small neighbourhood development groups on shoestring budgets, and tens of hundreds of organisations along a complex continuum in-between.

This diversity reflects the picture outlined by the European Commission (1996, p. 1b) which has reported that "at one end of the spectrum, the world of voluntary organisations merges imperceptibly into the tissues of everyday social, community, and family life; at the other end can be found great institutions of enormous national and even international importance such as universities, hospitals, research and cultural institutions ... Very many voluntary organisations work closely with public authorities in conventional spheres like social work; others maintain a strong tradition of complete independence and are concerned with radical social programmes or 'alternative' lifestyles".

The voluntary and community sector in Ireland has been seen (Faughnan and Kelleher, 1993, p. 11) as contributing to all areas of public life and to a healthy democratic environment, "through its capacity to act independently of the government, by providing channels for citizen involvement, widening the range of choice available, redistributing resources, and contributing to more diverse and decentralised institutional structures".

President Mary Robinson sees voluntary organisations playing an intermediary role between political administration and individual citizens, "bringing together within a single vision of action, both strong community values and a distinctively modern organisational structure which is open, enabling and listening ... They are a factor in the balance between the centre and the periphery, between the individual and the bureaucracy ... The linkages these networks establish cannot but humanise bureaucracy and create dialogue rather than paperwork, consultation rather than anonymity" (Robinson, 1996).

The Irish government Green Paper, Supporting Voluntary Activity,
attributes to voluntary and community organisations a significant role in the shaping of society and of democracy: "There is a need to create a more participatory democracy where active citizenship is fostered. In such a society, the ability of the voluntary and community sector to provide channels for the active involvement and participation of citizens is fundamental. An active voluntary and community sector contributes to a democratic, pluralist society, provides opportunities for the development of decentralised institutional administrative structure and fosters a climate in which innovative solutions to complex social problems and enhancement of quality of life can be pursued and realised" (Department of Social Welfare, 1997, p. 24).

From these perspectives, the study of voluntary and community organisations' usage of information and communication technologies may provide important pointers as to the relationship between citizenship and access to, and production and control of, information. It may, further, be a means of deepening understanding of the social diffusion of new ICTs.

The present writers consider it important not to make the assumption that information and communication technologies are necessary to the effective functioning of all voluntary and community organisations, a necessary or even less sufficient condition of active citizenship. Equally, we make no assumption that information and communication technologies can of themselves create a more participatory political culture. Many voluntary and community organisations are functioning effectively without using computers and have no interest in using them or hooking up to the Internet. Others use computers at a high degree of sophistication for processing documents, maintaining accounts, or holding client information, but have seen no need to communicate from computer to computer. Such choices may, in many instances, be exercised in the best interests of the organisation concerned. In other instances, however, they may not have been based on the fullest possible information. It is important to acknowledge also that the Internet is not always, or even usually, the most useful means of communication for community or voluntary work — there are many situations in which a face-to-face meeting, a phone call, or a fax message is more appropriate than exchanging e-mail.

III THE INTERNET AS CONTESTED SPACE

Curiously, it is the now venerable Internet which remains the single most frequently cited element of the "new" information infrastructure, and therefore also of the "information society". Its spawning in the 1990s of the WorldWide Web has been a spur to business and government to explore the Internet's application to their purposes. Voluntary and community
organisations have followed suit. This appears somewhat paradoxical, as the WorldWide Web is less amenable to direct applications by persons and organisations with moderate or low computer skills and resources than are earlier Internet technologies such as electronic mail, mailing lists and bulletin boards. The evidence of the current research project suggests that the commercial sector’s focus on the Web and its revenue-generating potential, and the attendant media interest, have produced an “emulation” effect among voluntary and community organisations. The predominant use of the WorldWide Web, developed as a vehicle for the sharing of scientific information, has come to be one-way promotional communication from commercial and governmental centres outwards. This is a source of some disappointment to Tim Berners-Lee, the scientist credited with the invention of the WorldWide Web, who has declared that “working together in the community was the focus” (Lavin, 1997, p. 26).

Research on earlier information and communication technologies (Laudon, 1977) found that the use of information technology was not likely to result in a dramatic increase in participation or political interest, and a similar argument has been developed in analysis of the Internet (McChesney, 1996). What has been observed, however, is that politically active people are drawn to the Internet as a tool to facilitate their political activities (McChesney, 1996; Rogers, et al., 1994; Hacker, 1996), and in this sense, the technology may be useful for strengthening and expanding existing democratic networks and processes.

An influential group of Internet advocates sees the use of ICTs and of the Internet in particular as, of themselves, enabling new “communities” and more effective democratic action. One of the early champions of cyberculture and the “virtual community” sees the availability of ever-more information in electronic form as the foundation for “citizen-to-citizen discussion backed up by facts available to all [which] could grow into the real basis for a possible electronic democracy of the future” (Rheingold, 1994, p. 91). Another radical exponent of this techno-utopian view envisages possibilities for social action and democratic participation, by means of computer communications, even where more basic, material goods and services are in short supply (Negroponte, 1997). Negroponte sees the “information superhighway ... creating a totally new, global social fabric” (1996, p. 103), electronic mail as “the dominant interpersonal telecommunications medium, approaching if not overshadowing voice within the next fifteen years” (1996, p. 191) and the “digital age” as “decentralizing, globalizing, harmonizing, and empowering” (1996, p. 229).

The work of Jürgen Habermas on the public sphere has been central to much recent empirical and theoretical work on the democratic potential of the
Internet. McChesney believes (1996, p. 108) that the Internet could nurture “a 21st-century Habermasian “public sphere”, where informed interactive debate can flower independent of government or commercial control”. Friedland’s research focuses on how the Internet can be used (1996, p. 207) “to extend democratic practices and lead to a broadened public sphere”, by strengthening social capital relationships, grounded in the concrete practices of citizens. However, a key difficulty with using a “public sphere” argument in relation to the Internet is the limited access to the technology — only a small minority of the population in Ireland and elsewhere use it. It may be more useful to speak of pluralist “public spheres” along the lines of theories developed in critical response to Habermas’s perspective of one legitimate public sphere (see Fraser, 1992). McLaughlin uses a “parallel public spheres” perspective to suggest (1993, p. 616) that “women can take advantage of new media developments and alternative forms of media and participation in order to develop new forms of public life”, and this perspective could also describe communities of interest based in voluntary and community organisations on the Internet.

Referring more specifically to voluntary organisations, Joel de Rosnay, of France’s national science and technology centre at La Villette, Paris, states (1996, p. 34) that “one of the fundamental characteristics of the information society is the stimulation of new forms of bargaining, of commodity exchange. The flowering of the voluntary sector, of welfare bodies, of humanitarian aid, of citizens’ organisations is intensified”.

Bill Gates sees benefits for citizens’ groups in the developing online networks; he suggests that every local administration could become the focus for “an electronic community” (1996, p. 243) and that “some institutions will have to make big changes as online communities get more powerful” (1996, p. 244). Critical theorists reject such views, expecting the Internet, despite its apparent randomness and anarchy, eventually to become subject to the same commercial dictates as the mass media and to the same power relations as prevail in other forms of public communication. Schiller believes (1993, p. 64) that “the Internet could be the basis of a free social information facility in the electronic era, yet it is being divested of its public character”. He further considers the stated ambitions of the Clinton-Gore administration in the United States to develop an information infrastructure which is accessible to all to be incompatible with their reliance on market forces to build the networks. He argues (1996, p. 83) that the “massive communications merger movement provides the context, and the motivation, for the national information infrastructure project”.

It remains the case, however, that the Internet, as a set of technologies, is very largely based on collectively agreed standards, that it is resistant to
proprietary takeover and central control either by governments concerned, say, about its possible abuse for pornographic or terrorist purposes or by corporations wishing to derive greater revenue from providing access. The Internet has proven remarkably resilient as a decentralised, standards-based network of networks. The strength of the Internet's free-information ethos can be seen in the reluctance of publishers on the Internet to charge for access to their services. Further, it seems unlikely that access to the Internet will, in the foreseeable future, cost more than the current levels (typically, £10 per month subscription; local-call access from much of the country).

Yet the current research indicates that cost is a major factor inhibiting the more widespread and more effective use of the Internet by some voluntary and community organisations. That and other inhibiting factors aside, however, the Internet remains open to exploitation by citizen groups, voluntary organisations, social movements and others who wish to develop its participatory-democratic uses.

IV SURVEY FINDINGS

The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age research includes three components: surveys, action, and advocacy/policy. The survey component involves three surveys, conducted from early 1996 to mid-1997. Analysis of the quantitative survey allows us to sketch broad patterns of Internet use among community and voluntary organisations. As well, preliminary analysis of the qualitative survey research has deepened our understanding of the barriers to the more widespread diffusion of more recent ICTs in this sector.

When the research project began, no information was available on how many Irish community and voluntary organisations were using computers and the Internet. We began with a quantitative survey, casting as wide a net as possible in order to map out patterns of use by a broad spectrum of organisations. The main objective of Survey 1, conducted in early 1996, was to identify levels of ICT use among community and voluntary organisations and factors associated with their use.

The survey instrument was a postal questionnaire, sent to a random sample of 300 community and voluntary organisations. (A more detailed description of the survey methodology can be found in O'Donnell and Trench forthcoming.) The response rate was 82 per cent. Organisations in six categories of interest were included in the survey. The responding organisations were almost evenly split between those located in Dublin and outside Dublin, and they were also divided fairly evenly among three categories of reported annual income: less than £10,000; from £10,000 to
£100,000; and more than £100,000.

A major finding of Survey 1 was that the level of income of an organisation was the most significant factor associated with use of the technologies. Rates of computer and electronic mail (email) use in the survey year and in the previous year are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Levels of Computer and Internet Use by Community and Voluntary Organisations

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Aside from low annual income, other factors associated with lower computer use in a community and voluntary organisation included: sharing an office with another organisation, having a focus on neighbourhood or parish concerns (as opposed to a wider geographical focus), and having an interest in women's issues. The organisations reported that the following factors discouraged their use of computers: lack of funding (reported by 62 per cent of organisations overall and 82 per cent of those without computers); lack of time for training; lack of technical support; and the belief that computers were not necessary for the organisation's work.

The survey found that an Internet email address was associated with a more sophisticated use of computers — many organisations using hardware such as CD-ROMS and document scanners also had a modem and Internet access as part of their general high-end approach to computer technology. An email address was also more prevalent among organisations with an EU or national focus than among those with a neighbourhood focus. There was a disparity of Internet and computer use among organisations with different interests. At the bottom of the scale were organisations with an interest in women, particularly those that also had a low annual income. A significant number of organisations indicated their intention to use computer communications for the first time in 1996, particularly organisations having an interest in the environment and international development.

One year after Survey 1, two follow-up surveys were conducted. The objective of Survey 2 was to find out if the groups which had stated they intended to be online in 1996 did succeed in hooking up to the Internet (or maintaining their Internet connection), and to identify problems and benefits of using the technology. Survey 2 looked at the organisations that did not
report an interest in women or environment and international development (those organisations which did were the subjects of Survey 3) but did intend to be online in 1996. Sixty-six respondents fell into this category. The survey instrument was a short questionnaire, distributed by post. The survey was quantitative except for one open-ended question seeking qualitative data on Internet experiences. The survey response rate was 79 per cent. Survey 2 found that among organisations planning to use the Internet, those in the higher income category were more likely to have actually done so, as illustrated in Chart 1.

The white and dark bars in Chart 1 represent organisations which stated in 1996 that they planned to use the Internet by 1997. The paired bars are divided into three income levels. The black bars indicate the percentage of organisations (in each income level category) which had acquired an Internet email address in 1997. The white bars indicate those in the same income level which did not have an Internet email address in 1997. The pattern indicates that among community and voluntary organisations planning to use the Internet, its diffusion is much more rapid among those with larger annual incomes.

Organisations using the Internet reported that the technology was most useful for communications with international contacts and with EU partners on transnational projects. The Internet was also of benefit to organisations with branch offices or those working regularly with other organisations online. Organisations with a local community focus using the Internet were
clearly keen on the technology but uncertain about what to do with it. Email was reported to be the most useful Internet technology. There were few problems associated with using it, although a number of organisations indicated difficulties transferring attached files. The WorldWide Web was reported to be useful for searching for information. Many organisations without a Web page were in the process of assembling one, some as part of internal training or of projects.

Reported benefits of the Internet included: increasing the speed of communication; reducing phone costs, especially international calls; answering public inquiries; transferring long documents more efficiently; and being able to use Web pages as a marketing tool and a means of providing open access to documents for the public. Reported problems with the Internet included restricted Internet access within organisations — for example, only one computer would have a modem, and it would be too expensive to establish organisation-wide access. There were problems with staff members using a personal email address for work and then taking the email address with them when leaving the organisation. The Web was criticised for slow performance, especially during busy periods, and there were reports of frequent system crashes while searching for information. The helplines of Internet service providers were criticised for being too busy and understaffed. A common experience for organisations was that in the first few months after hooking up to the Internet, not much use would be made of the technology. Several organisations expressed the belief that they were not using the Internet to its full potential.

The third survey was qualitative: telephone interviews with the community and voluntary organisations which had, in Survey 1, defined themselves as belonging to the category either of "women" or of "environment and international development", that is, to the categories with the lowest and the highest rates of adoption of Internet technologies. Of the 80 organisations, 63 were successfully interviewed, making the response rate 79 per cent. At the time of writing, analysis of the Survey 3 data is in progress; however, initial analysis allows considerable insight into the uses of, and the barriers to use of, the Internet among Irish community and voluntary organisations.

A key finding of Survey 3 was the reinforcement of the finding of earlier surveys, namely that cost is a major factor inhibiting the use of the technology in community and voluntary organisations. There were numerous examples of this in the telephone survey, particularly among organisations in the lowest income category, i.e., less than £10,000 annually:

To be honest, our computer packed up about six months ago, so we haven't actually used it at all, because it's more or less finished now. It
was mostly my husband who was using it, but we haven't used it now at all and I don't think ... well, we can't really afford another one, so that's it. (Wildlife protection organisation)

We've talked about getting in the Internet, but it's more the finance, getting it hooked up, that's the problem. Our computers are fairly old as well. We were given a new one, an old model by Apple, but we have difficulty raising the money for that kind of thing. There's only two computers between 18 of us, so there's always difficulties trying to find time to get on it, and even if you are on it, there's always someone else hanging over your shoulder trying to get on it as well. (Conservation organisation)

There are clearly other factors involved, however, such as the particular interest of the organisation. Environment and international development organisations are keen users of the technology. Among the low-income organisations surveyed which were using the Internet, all but one were concerned with environmental and international development issues; the exception was a local women's group which used the email address of its chairperson, a woman on several national committees, who travelled a great deal to meetings:

It's been helpful, of course. Especially the email, because I'm away so often. If anyone wants to leave a message that they're sure I'm going to get, it's the easiest thing to do. (Local women's organisation)

A limiting factor common to community and voluntary organisations of all interest areas is limited time to use, or learn how to use, the technology:

We don't use it very often. We would use the email a certain amount, but ... we got the computer in July, and I would do a lot of education work, going out to visit schools ... I was just thinking that I have hardly sat down at the computer much at all because, to tell you the honest truth, I just don't have the time to do it. I would need to actually sit down and do it for a couple of hours ... and when I come back from a school or something, you know there's always something else to do. (International missionary organisation)

Email would be what we've been using. Somebody would always look in and give me the messages or send the messages for me. I haven't sat down and sorted it. I can assure you, I wish I could. I work pretty hard here. I would love to have the time to sit down and do it. (Women's training organisation)
Our problem is that we're so busy all the time. You know sometimes you wouldn't have time to actually answer your email, whereas you'd still consider post to be more important, you know? There's a new rule though: we have to answer our email every morning. I have such a backlog now. (International solidarity organisation)

Training in information technologies is a major problem for community and voluntary organisations, especially outside major towns and cities:

This year, we're organising a computer course here in our own area, which means that we're actually having to buy into a computer, and we're all voluntary, so we have to find funding to do that. But it's to provide courses in a rural area, because those who might want to do it, it's just not possible. We're 16 miles from the nearest centre where there would be a useful computer course. (Local women's group)

UCG was onto me the other day about what kind of courses women would be interested in. And it's great to an extent but at the same time, until courses start coming into the community for people... you're talking about a round trip of 30 miles for people to go into Galway from here. I feel very strongly about it. Otherwise people are disadvantaged. (Women's training organisation)

Another problem is indifference or unfamiliarity with the technology among older people working or volunteering for organisations:

Our women are too old for computers, and we don't need them ... Computers would be no good to us ... The Internet? None of our women would know how to work it. Even if it was free, it would be no good to us. (Local women's group)

Then there are the technical problems — by no means the sole preserve of voluntary and community organisations but, in the circumstances indicated above, more likely to deter from further use than might be the case with better-endowed commercial or government organisations:

It crashes all the time. It's either a hard disk problem or an Internet problem. It's fairly new, I bought it in December 1995 ... and it's been giving me trouble since the start. At the moment, the crashes happen only when using the Internet but they've happened before on other occasions, so I'm not quite sure what the situation is ... (Development education organisation)

We can never get on to it. When we go to literally just logon, it's either constantly engaged or it never, it doesn't dial fully, and it's rare that we
would ever get on first time. And often we'll just try and try, try, try, and wouldn't get on all day. (International environmental organisation)

It is becoming clear that we should speak not of “the Internet” but rather of “Internet technologies” because there is a considerable difference among the technologies, their usefulness to voluntary and community organisations, and their patterns of use. The distinction should be made between electronic mail, mailing lists, bulletin boards, and the WorldWide Web. By making this distinction, it becomes clear that for voluntary and community organisations, the Internet is more a communications tool than an information resource.

Electronic mail is clearly the most widely-used and useful of the Internet technologies for the community and voluntary organisations online, particularly for organisations doing international work:

Being an environmental organisation, we'd try to communicate with the other groups in other countries by email, just because not using faxes, you know, postage or whatever. So we would try to use it mainly just for email. We can rarely use the Web, really. If we're using the Web it would just be to get very general information. We wouldn't really use it that often. (Environmental organisation)

Email is tremendously useful. Say when you want to send a message to a group of people, I find it very cost-effective. (Environmental organisation)

Email has been useful and it's going to be extremely useful to us in the future because our contacts over in Bellarus and western Russia, recently we put them online ... They have it up and running but it's actually coming to us in gobbledegook at the moment, so we're trying to get that sorted out. But when it does, it will be invaluable to us. (International solidarity organisation)

When I'm doing the newsletter and things like that, I get stuff sent to me on e-mail by various people that are contributing. (Marine protection organisation)

For most organisations online, the WorldWide Web would appear at present to be of occasional and limited use:

Just on Friday I found a site that was quite useful, but that was just accidental. We haven't used it for research, looking for information. (National wildlife organisation)

There's just far too much, that you want to read. And I wouldn't be able to use it either. I imagine that there are quicker and easier routes in
and out of it, and printing and stuff like that that I don't know how to do. (International women's solidarity organisation)

However, a small number of organisations, particularly campaigning organisations, have found it invaluable:

We've over a thousand relevant references we've picked up off the Internet. Reports and things. We found this retired professor of hydrogeology from Berkeley who has become a crusader against dumps in America, and he has a home page ... We've been in regular contact with him, and we've got stuff bouncing backwards and forwards... (Antitoxic wastes advocacy group)

Many community and voluntary organisations have an interest in publishing on the Web but this process appears somewhat removed from the core communication processes within an organisation. An organisation may have a Web page but staff, members and volunteers may not have seen it. This is much less likely not to be the case with newsletters or other promotional material.

The [international organisation] as a whole is going online ... there was a man from Scotland who came over to put us online, and they are putting a page on the Web ... I'm not sure if they're actually on it or not. They were trying to get something together. We in Ireland haven't actually got our own page. That's something that we're working on as well. (International missionary organisation)

We have a Web site already. [Name of man working for another organisation] put up a Web site for us. But it isn't updated as much as it should be, and if we had it, we could update it. I don't know the Web address. [Name of man] would know. (Environmental organisation)

It may be that the Internet technologies, particularly the WorldWide Web, are limited in their ability to meet the core information and communication needs of community and voluntary organisations. The newsletter delivered through the post appears to have a communication value which a Web page, even one which is updated frequently, cannot easily replicate. The same appears true of many other means by which community and voluntary organisations communicate, inform others and inform themselves.

We just send out little notifications. We have a brochure printed up that we send to health boards' staff, doctors, rape crisis centres, other voluntary groups. (Women's refuge)

We do a periodic newsletter whenever the spirit moves us and we have
the time. That's the way we ... it goes to all our members and we keep in touch that way. (Environmental organisation)

We all live around, so we just phone each other. (Local women's group)

[We advertise] through the local newspapers ... and then there's the parish bulletin from the church. We hand in the event to the priest and he puts it in the parish bulletin, and then posters. It's fairly well covered, although people often say "Oh, I didn't know that was on". (Local women's group)

The findings of the survey research to date concur with findings from a comprehensive study of ICT use by community and voluntary organisations in the United Kingdom, namely that: "adoption and use of IT will continue to be problematic, and its exploitation will continue far below potential, while organisations lack money, appropriate advice, and the appropriate training, in order to commit the kinds of investment which technology calls for" (Community Development Foundation, 1992, p. 8). However, another explanation might be that the Internet technologies in their current configurations may not be appropriate to the cultural environment of many voluntary and community organisations, or that the technologies are failing to meet the organisations' communication and information needs.

V ACTION RESEARCH

The action research component of the present research comprises:

- Support for and evaluation of the Inner City Computer Network, set up in conjunction with the Dublin Inner City Partnership, one of the initial twelve multipartite local area partnerships established in areas of high unemployment.
- Advice and evaluation for several community-based information technology projects with which one of the present writers is associated.
- A conference, Harnessing the Internet, held at Dublin City University in September 1996, attended by more than 140 representatives of 80 community and voluntary organisations, and including practical workshops on specific aspects of the Internet as well as papers and presentations on current Internet-based projects and on policy issues.

Work on the development of the Inner City Computer Network began with a series of meetings in 1994-95 initiated by local organisations in Dublin's inner city, and to which one of the present writers was invited. In an earlier initiative, Dublin Inner City Partnership had allocated £21,000 to help community organisations purchase computer communications equipment. In
some instances, it was stated, the purchased modems had not been removed from their packaging or had not been made to operate.

From mid-1995, a part-time project co-ordinator provided technical support and training to the community organisations who wished to use the electronic mail services and bulletin boards which had been identified as the most appropriate means of exchanging and sharing information. Only six of the approximately 25 eligible community organisations linked to DICP participated in this pilot phase of the project and it took several months to get all of these connected to the selected host service. Ten topic-based bulletin boards were set up on that host service to which all of the subscribing organisations had access either to read the entries, or to comment on them, or to add new ones, but very limited use was made of these bulletin boards. The project co-ordinator was the source of the large majority of messages posted to them.

An interim evaluation of the Inner City Computer Network found that organisational barriers to using the Internet included a high turnover of staff members, lack of available time to use the technology, re-organisation and refurbishment of premises, inadequate computer resources, and lack of a systematic means of sharing information within the organisation (Ennals and Trench, 1996). One striking feature of the ICCN's hesitant development was the contrast between the time being found for face-to-face meetings and training sessions associated with the project, and the much smaller effort being put into follow-up work.

It has also become clear through this project that voluntary and community organisations — in this case, community organisations — were considerably less interested in sharing information and, therefore, in computer communications, than had been suggested in the earliest preparations for the establishment of the network. Issues of territoriality have tended to outweigh the influence of any information-sharing ethos. Kate Ennals, the project co-ordinator, commented (Ennals, 1997, p. 74) that "groups were not able to provide and share information — partly because of fear of giving up information". To use the Internet, and specifically the WorldWide Web, says the inventor of the Web, "you need ... a web of trust out there on the Net. You can't trust people with your shared knowledge space and give them a role where they can play unless you can trust them" (Lavin, 1997, p. 27).

The survey evidence and action research indicate that voluntary and community organisations are protective and territorial about their information both on a geographical and on a topic basis. Thus, voluntary organisations in cognate areas, say, of health awareness, are more inclined to collect and compile their information by their own individual means than to seek it from, or offer it to, other similar organisations. Harvey (1997, p. 13)
found that two-thirds of the national voluntary organisations which he surveyed conducted their own research on funding, activities and developments in the voluntary sector; he suggests that "a considerable duplication may be taking place".

Despite these and other constraints, interest among Dublin inner city organisations in having access to the Internet has grown appreciably during the period of the project. The commercial and media attention given to the WorldWide Web and the emergence of Web-based services targeted to the community and voluntary sector have both contributed to that increased interest. The work on the Inner City Computer Network has established Dublin Inner City Partnership as a resource for community organisations seeking more general guidance on "going online".

A recurrent issue in the present writers' contact with voluntary and community organisations and in the survey evidence is the inadequacy of technical and training resources geared to the voluntary and community sector. This has informed policy proposals made in the name of the research project and the elaboration — incomplete at the time of writing — of a proposal for a "one-stop shop" to provide the services indicated. Such support services are provided in other countries. For example, the conference, Harnessing the Internet, heard a presentation on South Australian community organisations' uses of information and communication technologies, including the Community Technology Service which provides advice, support and training to community organisations (Dublin City University, 1996). The South Australian service was set up with the aid of a government grant but has been self-funding since its third year.

VI POLICY INTERVENTIONS

With the publication of a Forbairt report, Ireland, the Digital Age and the Internet, and the establishment of the Information Society Steering Committee in early 1996, the debate which had been taking place internationally, and most notably from an Irish point of view, within the European Union and the European Commission, took more formal shape in Ireland. However, the composition of the Steering Committee, with eleven of its twenty members from the corporate sector and six from government, indicated that the "society" element was not integral to the government's understanding of the "information society". No representative of the voluntary and community sector was appointed to the committee.

In a submission to the Steering Committee, the present writers argued that an opportunity exists to foster a more democratic information society in Ireland by encouraging the adoption of information and communications
technologies by the voluntary and community sector. We further argued that voluntary organisations and community groups must be given the opportunity to participate actively in emerging communication and information networks, in order that they may advance their work of promoting democratic social and economic development. We advanced proposals to be included in a national strategy, among them research and development of resources and services related to ICTs which are specifically targeted to the needs of voluntary and community groups, such as information manuals, computer training courses, technical assistance services and procedures, and maintenance and support services. The emphasis on training support was reinforced in a later policy statement which one of the present writers co-authored (O’Siochru and Trench, 1997).

The Information Society Steering Committee’s report, Information Society Ireland: Strategy for Action, includes references to the possible lessening of social disadvantage through the use of ICTs and to the need for “an inclusive information society”. But its “social” proposals are effectively limited to those for a tax break to promote PC usage and easier Internet access in the homes and for funding of PC usage and easier Internet access in schools. Either or both of these could readily be construed as means to build the market for information and communication hardware and software.

Information Society Ireland makes repeated exhortations to government to develop citizen-centred services to which access could be had through local access points. The report refers to the possibility that citizens could participate more actively in government in the “information society” by means of a certain application of information technologies and “information society” structures. However, in failing to acknowledge the role of community, voluntary, charitable, campaigning, sporting, political, etc., organisations, Information Society Ireland implicitly leaves it to individual citizens to develop, each on her or his own behalf, an unmediated relationship with the government, thus reducing the prospects for achieving greater accessibility or responsiveness. The report’s references to communities, as, for instance, in a passing mention of possible linkages between colleges and communities (1996, p. 56), are vague.

On receipt of the report, the government moved responsibility for “information society” policy from the Department of Employment and Enterprise to the Department of the Taoiseach, thus establishing the “information society” as having higher priority and encompassing a broader range of issues. Simultaneous with the release of the report came the announcement of a £30 million programme to develop computer usage and skills in schools, to train teachers in computer skills, to establish an information technology advisory service for schools, to ensure that every school
has at least one multimedia-ready computer and to ensure Internet access for all public libraries. A new Information Society Commission was also announced, with a membership of eleven, including representatives of the community and voluntary sector, as well as another of the trade union movement.

In announcing the commission, the Taoiseach, John Bruton, declared that it was an objective of government policy that no one should be more than 30 minutes away from a public access point to government services using information and communications technologies. Concepts of universal service and universal access, which have informed the provision of basic telephony, were now implicitly being extended to computer-based information and communications services. Implementation of these commitments had barely begun, however, when the general election and a change of government intervened.

The following policy points, developed from the current research (see O'Donnell and Trench, forthcoming), remain relevant to the development of an inclusive model of "information society" in which democratic practice is enhanced:

- meaningful representation from the community and voluntary sector on "information society" commissions at national and European Union level;
- monitoring of "information society" policies to ensure that the benefits of new initiatives and technologies reach marginalised and disadvantaged groups;
- secure funding for community and voluntary organisations to allow them to build capacity within their organisations and use the new technologies if they wish;
- development of a computer technical support structure indigenous to the community and voluntary sector and providing training, technical support, advice on hardware and software purchases and maintenance;
- funding to facilitate Internet use by organisations facing specific barriers to adoption of the technology, such as low-income organisations, neighbourhood organisations and women's groups;
- regulation of telephone and Internet service providers to ensure affordable access for community and voluntary organisations to telephone and computer communications networks.

REFERENCES


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