WORKSHOP THEME PAPER

ADVOCACY IN THE INTERNET AGE – EXPLORING WAYS FORWARD FOR CIVIL SOCIETY
JANUARY 26TH – 30TH 2001

ORGANISED BY
PUBLIC AFFAIRS CENTRE, BANGALORE
MAHITI, BANGALORE
IT FOR CHANGE, BANGALORE

SUPPORTED BY THE ASIA FOUNDATION, BANGLADESH

INTERNET ADVOCACY & THE NON PROFIT SECTOR: CHARTING THE LANDSCAPE

Setting the canvas – Information Revolution and Civil Society

From the cave paintings of pre-historic times, through the great oral depositories of early and medieval epochs to the relatively modern forms of communication, the production and dissemination of information has been a dominant leitmotif in the fascinating saga of our evolution and progress. However, in all past episodes of change and paradigm shifts, information was like the ghost in Shakespeare's Hamlet - **"Always in the periphery of action, but never in it".** The ongoing information revolution makes a sharp detour from the past trajectories; the ownership and access to information has suddenly become the vantage point to observe, critique and plot development discourses and practices. Knowledge powered by technological breakthroughs and innovations is fast becoming the polarising force, sharply dividing the world into two camps, the "*connected*" and the "*dis-connected*" : a polarisation that reveals all potency to accentuate inequalities and differences among societies and economies in much sharper relief than conventional indicators like income or wealth.

Like any other radical change, the Information Revolution also shows a `biased' trend on the applied side. The corporate world or the profit sector has been the first to jump into (and thereafter control the new media bandwagon). An incisive report articulates this theme succinctly[1][1][1]: "*The corporate world has developed an intellectually respectable, highly marketable consumerist and entertainment-oriented vision of the new media - a vision that that dovetails nicely with that of computer libertarians who regard the Internet as the last 20th Century outpost of individual freedom. Drawing upon writers like George Gilder, Alvin Toffler, Nicholas Negroponte and Esther Dyson, Wired magazine has given these visions intellectual depth and cultural hipness. And Newt Gingrich has given it a political currency and respect*". The next entrant was the government. Under the rubric of transparency, accountability and openness, governments in many developing countries have adopted technology in a big way; e-governance is the new political currency that is being flaunted to boost the sagging images of many beleaguered states.

This change has happened alongside global shifts of profound political and economic nature. Given the economic architecture and political configurations that have emerged in the past two decades, it is no coincidence that the IT revolution has served the interests of rich economies and powerful global actors like MNCs.

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[1][1][1] Reinventing Democratic Culture in the Age of Electronic Networks' by David Bollier. Report submitted to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. 1996

As a critical buffer between commercial dreams and political calculations, civil society has over the ages demonstrated its effectiveness in preserving democratic spaces and participatory niches. In the **New Economy**, the powerful have shaped and dictated the discourse on transparency, accountability and openness, leaving little space for civil society to define these concepts, to protect their stakes as citizens. Nevertheless, in the past decade, we have seen inspiring global campaigns, aided by IT and the net, in civil society efforts to develop a critique of, and challenge hegemonic anti-people and anti-environment aspects of the new economy. Unfortunately, the contours of the sweeping changes ushered in by the ongoing information revolution have however, largely bypassed the non-profit sector or the civil society. The failure of civil society organisations to participate in the ongoing technology-led information revolution will enfeeble them in their socio-political struggles and result in their inevitable marginalisation in the long run.

Advocacy in the Internet Age: The Emerging wei-ji[2][2][2]

Civil Society is increasingly being conceptualised as a 'space' between the State (Government) and the Market (business) to challenge, contest, confront and collaborate for improving the quality of governance and safeguarding individual rights and ensuring social justice. And advocacy is a key strategy to use that space effectively. Most actors in the civil society arena, have sometime or other, used advocacy as a means to make their interventions more effective and focused. The emerging challenge in the context of the new economy is to tap evolving technological frontiers to enhance the potency of existing advocacy strategies and more important, to explore new and innovative modes of advocacy. Already, the responses to this challenge in the form of increasing use of information technology to enhance social capabilities can be discerned.

One arena which has emerged as a level playing field is the Internet. Whether one is talking about information regarding the quality of milk, crop inspection standards, databases of importers, global economic indicators, or government spending on politicians, publishing on the Net can effectively augment traditional communication channels. Interestingly, the Net is also seen today as a potent medium for capturing various `voices' which could then be selectively targeted or widely disseminated for impact. The flexibility and spread of the Net is also being effectively used by Civil Society Organisations for advocacy purposes. Submerging the notions of national communities, on-line communities are on the rise today drawn together by politics, ethnicity, gender or social cause demonstrating their new lobbying power on the global stage.

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[2][2][2] The dynamic world view of the Chinese is best represented by the term they use for `crisis' - wei-ji, composed of the characters for danger and opportunity.

Though the growth of the Internet has been nothing short of spectacular, its dispersion remains highly asymmetric. Over three-quarters of the computers linked to the Internet are found in the United States, followed by Europe and the emergent economies. The third world represents only a minuscule proportion of Internet users. Thus, while an estimated 3.1% of the population in high-income countries use the Internet, only 0.0002% of the population in low-income countries do so, a multiple factor of approximately 15,000[3][3][3]! Given this scenario it is no wonder that CSOs in the south have rarely shown an inclination to engage the potential of the Internet to strengthen their advocacy muscle.

A quick appraisal of some of the emergent narratives in the interface between non-profits and the Internet highlights a spectrum of opportunities and challenges:

Beckoning opportunities

 Reinvigorating the public discourse: Faster, easier and cheaper channels of communication are actively facilitating closer interactions between various constituencies. A new ecology of public knowledge is fast emerging, providing new leverage points for effecting changes. Electronic newsgroups and online postings by committed activists are radically altering the lexicon of public discourse and praxis in ways previously deemed impossible.

 Re-negotiating relationships: As individuals gain access to new information sources, many traditional intermediaries are getting increasingly bypassed. Distributed electronic networks are forcing deep structural changes in the way our societal institutions function. Networking is re-configuring our experiences of time, distance and community, and eroding traditional boundaries between public and private, work and home.

 Rise of the `Gift Economy'. The gift economy is a branch of sociological inquiry that illuminates the moral connections that bind a group of people together. Through the Internet, people make available all sorts of useful information for free - a behaviour that is in defiance of orthodox economic rules that claim that such behaviour can occur only with financial incentives. The robustness of the Internet itself rests on this essence of community and civility.

 Networks of Believers: Perhaps the most far-reaching implication of the online social revolution is the power of the Internet to create networks of believers dedicated to a shared purpose. As French Bishop Jacques Gaillot describes: "The primitive Church was a kind of Internet itself, which was one of the reasons it was so difficult for the Roman Empire to combat it. The early Christians understood that what was important was not to claim physical power in a physical place but to establish a network of believers - to be online". Seniornet, Peacenet, Econet and Womensnet are all good examples of online communities of believers.

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[3][3][3] ITU, *World Telecommunication Development Report*, 1995

Looming Challenges

  Locked in a reactive catch-up mode: There are few examples of creative and original use of the Internet by non-profits. There is an urgency to shift the usage profile of the Internet from a `downloading' to an `uploading' mode.

  Low usage as a unifying forum: The enormous growth in the number of non-profit websites and organisations using email over the past few years has not really translated into the strategic use of the Internet as a space for co-ordinated effort. There is lack of a coherent, positive vision that can help mobilise and unify diverse non-profit players and organise their discourses into a more coherent framework. The existing public interest vision is largely fragmented, issue specific and lacks an organising political philosophy.

  Barriers to internalise IT applications: Lack of knowledge about and access to affordable tools, training and technical assistance are frequently cited as the major reasons preventing non-profits from effectively pursuing IT applications. However, tools and technologies are fast being adapted and contextualised to suit non-profits' activity profiles and budgets. The key challenge would then be the ability of non-profit leadership to facilitate this.

  Internal governance: Much work needs to be done towards getting the 'house in order', in using IT applications for internal governance and management of the non-profit sector. This would provide a basis for increased accountability and transparency, vis-à-vis stakeholders, crucial to NGO image and representation.

  Disconnect between non-profit interests in using technology and availability of funding for such activities: There is increasing criticism that foundations and other donor agencies are reluctant to support Internet led advocacy initiatives. There is an urgent need to sensitise these resource-support constituencies to the emerging potential of the new medium.

  Content related barriers; Dearth of local information, language barriers and low levels of literacy prove to be powerful barriers for the extensive use of the Internet, especially in south Asia. The challenge is to not merely provide access but comfort and capability of use.

The Way Forward…

From a strategic perspective, the global contours of the Internet revolution need to be mediated, adapted and contextualised by CSOs in the South. Adding a new dimension to this is the increasing application of IT in matters of governance. As the concept of e-

government takes clear shape and form, CSOs need to reorient their strategies to negotiate with the state effectively on equal terms. Similarly in political struggles against both the state and the market, the potential of IT and the Net remains to be explored. The goal should be to provide connectivity that is strategic, and access that is meaningful. Key challenges looming ahead would include promoting local language applications, developing simple to use and easy to maintain systems and user-friendly software that have capabilities for documentation. Pro-active engagement is important for defining and deploying IT to align with the strategic interests of civil society. That will also implicitly contribute to the evolution of a more democratic philosophy of information and knowledge.

As an exploratory step, it is proposed to organise a small meet of interested CSOs in South Asia in the form of a highly interactive Workshop. The forum will have the following specific objectives in focus:

- *Sensitise the participants to the emerging potential for using the Net as a medium for advocacy*

- *Facilitate a forum to discuss and share common concerns on the emergent challenges*

- *Show case a selected spectrum of internet advocacy strategies*

- *Give the participants a hands-on experience in designing simple internet based campaigns*

- *Explore options for future networking and resource sharing on a regional basis.*

It is hoped that this preliminary step will facilitate an enabling environment in the regional context for stimulating meaningful, creative and adaptable practices in the realm of Internet advocacy.