Self-Organized Social Solidarity (SoSS) Initiatives in Greece: Exploring Their Scope and Their Relationship to Online Media

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the economic crisis in Greece, the first impacts were felt on standards of everyday living. Citizens, frustrated by the state's handling of the crisis, felt the urge to self-organize and take action based on their own strengths and volunteerism as the only practical solution to fill in the gaps left by the state's absence of intervention. Rooted in the country's economic crisis, Greek citizens' self-organized social solidarity (SoSS) initiatives have been focused on acting and innovating rather than protesting and are now rapidly growing. Examples of such initiatives are social grocery stores, alternative currencies, time banks, neighborhood groups for sanitation and general caretaking, assistance to students in primary/secondary education to name a few. This article has two main objectives. The first is to present self-organized social solidarity initiatives in Greece and further attempt to characterize them based on certain features, such as their scope and mode of operation. The second objective is to investigate how these initiatives use the internet and online media, with an emphasis on social media for communicating, coordinating and further developing such activities.

Keywords: Collective Ventures, Internet, Online Social Networks, Self-Organization, Social Media, Solidarity Initiatives

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2009, when the economic crisis in Greece became more evident, many changes occurred in the country, one change being the further development of civil society. The State had (and still has) severe problems in generating funds and helping its citizens at the same time. The combination of high taxes and low incomes created a new reality for most people and new needs emerged in everyday life.

In the beginning, civil society tried to protest through strikes and demonstrations, but soon realized that this was not the right way of acting since it led to no practical effects. People decided to form assemblies and in many neigh-
neighborhoods the so-called “people assemblies” were formed, with indignant citizens discussing the problems and the deficiencies of the state and proposing solutions. According to Soritopoulos and Karamagioli (2005) civil society in Greece was “relatively underdeveloped and poorly organized [...], comparatively weak”.

There were many initiatives, but Greek civil society was still influenced by political parties. However, the problems of society and citizens were far more serious and required action. Therefore, citizens started to self-organize in order to solve as many problems they could. Several problems were crucial for survival (e.g. food). Further to this, many other aspects of everyday life which were dependent on the state, began to become independent from bureaucracy and public-sector organizations (e.g. neighborhood sanitation or student lessons). Therefore, a number of self-organized social solidarity (SoSS) initiatives have emerged. Some of the initiatives have been inspired by organizations abroad (e.g. systems for alternative currencies). Most initiatives do not have the need of state support to function. Even those that do, are kept alive through the help of citizens.

The first objective of this article is to present such self-organized social solidarity initiatives in Greece and further attempt to characterize them based on certain features, such as their scope and mode of operation. The second objective is to investigate how these initiatives use the internet and online media, with emphasis on social media for communicating, coordinating and further developing such activities.

For both these objectives, our discussion departs from a brief contextualization of our work within the broader agenda of technology- and organization-related issues for IT use by voluntary non-profit and non-governmental organizations. This discussion is useful to keep in mind, as our presentation moves on to the landscape of self-organized social solidarity initiatives in Greece.

2. I.T. USE BY CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS: TECHNOLOGY- AND ORGANIZATION-RELATED ISSUES

Many different types of organizations can be found in civil society that are likely to differ considerably from one another in terms of the ways they use information technology and arrange their internal structure and organizational relations. Some well-known (Saeed et al, 2008) such types of organizations include community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activist groups, think tanks, cultural groups as well as informal citizens organizations and cooperatives.

In recent years, the number of these organizations is constantly growing due to the fact that the problems which societies and citizens face are also growing at a fast pace. At the same time, information technology advancements offer a multitude of new possibilities for organizing and communicating that until a few years ago were not available at all, or at least not for lay people with no specialized technical knowledge.

The expectation that civil society organizations will take advantage of information technology to operate more efficiently has been much discussed in the literature, with information technology collectively referring to tools such as websites, information systems and strategies that would help civil society organizations get organized and communicate (Merkel et al, 2007). According to early literature, when a civil society organization finds the information system or technology that suits its needs, it can stand out from other similar organizations by becoming more efficient and increasing its reputation, which in turn means that it can attract more volunteers (Klemz et al, 2003). On top of that, such an organization can stand better chances to attract funding, train volunteers who want to join it, create online and offline communities and improve its external and internal communication (Klemz et al, 2003, Spencer, 2002).
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