Chapter 19
ICTs for Empowerment?
Disability Organizations and the Democratizing Potential of Web 2.0 in Scotland

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ABSTRACT
In recent years, voluntary organizations and advocacy groups have become increasingly influential in the British political landscape as intermediaries between institutions and citizens. Amongst those, disability organizations constitute an important example because they seek to represent a group which has traditionally been excluded from politics. However, concerns remain with regard to the representativeness and accountability of these bodies, and therefore with the legitimacy of their role in governance. This chapter sets out to understand whether disability organizations can use the internet, and especially Web 2.0 features, to develop a more participatory relationship with disabled people, thus becoming better democratic actors. In particular, this issue is addressed through the results of an empirical study of Scottish disability organizations' websites. Whilst the internet seems to possess great potential against disabling barriers, findings for this study are controversial, and disabled users seem at best to be mobilized around a pre-determined agenda rather than genuinely engaged as participants.

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INTRODUCTION

Can the internet contribute to the empowerment of “people who are often left out of the [public] debate, because they lack the competencies needed to gain a voice”? (Coleman & Blumler, 2009, p. 176). In order to provide useful insights into this issue, this chapter sets out to look beyond formal e-democracy platforms and to establish whether there are areas of contemporary governance in which the internet can have a significant, albeit indirect, democratizing impact. Whilst in fact “official” spaces for citizen consultation and deliberation represent technology’s most recognizable contribution to public decision-making, it seems also crucial to understand whether the combination of changing governance arrangements with the social affordances of the internet in everyday life can foster participation amongst those in society that are otherwise excluded from the public arena.

In this context, one area in which the internet could be particularly significant is that of Voluntary Sector Organizations (VSOs). In recent years, these have become important players in public decision-making in the UK, especially when acting on behalf of marginalized groups. In particular, the internet could provide these organizations with opportunities to connect with their “constituents,” and thus acquire something closer to a democratic mandate in the policy debate.

This chapter explores such a possibility through an empirical investigation of the websites of Scottish disability organizations. Following a brief review of existing research on these issues, an innovative framework for the analysis of the position of disabled people vis-à-vis governance processes in the digital age is presented. Thereafter, findings are discussed in connection with relevant literature from both internet politics research and disability studies. While generalizations will only be possible within the limitations imposed by a case study approach, both the methodology designed for this study and its results are intended to contribute to a growing body of literature on the political significance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

BACKGROUND: NEW TECHNOLOGIES, OLD INEQUALITIES

In recent decades, British politics has been affected by a decline in public participation, primarily signalled by a steep fall in electoral turnout rates. While some have argued that citizen disengagement from traditional politics in Western democracies is to some extent being compensated by a shift towards alternative forms of engagement and mobilization (Norris, 2002; Wellman et al., 1988), it remains that the emergence of such a (perceived) democratic gap has prompted specific government action to reform governance in the UK both at local and national level.

Therefore, since the landslide election of 1997 and for the following thirteen years, Britain’s New Labour government looked at ways to bring decision-making closer to citizens as part of a comprehensive plan for “democratic renewal” (Ashworth et al., 2004; Stewart, 2003). Besides regulations aimed at making voting easier and the establishment of devolved national assemblies in Northern Ireland and Wales, as well as the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, government efforts have in recent years been directed at encouraging local authorities to involve their residents in decision-making through a series of innovative consultation and deliberation processes, with the aim of becoming more accountable and responsive to their needs (for a detailed description of these see: Stoker, 2004, pp. 108-25). Furthermore, an expansion in citizen participation also seems to remain high amongst the priorities of the current Conservative-led coalition government, as outlined in David Cameron’s “Big Society” speech in