Chapter 20

A Longitudinal Study of Political Technology Use by Nonprofit Child Advocacy Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses advocacy technology use by a group of nonprofit advocacy organizations over three periods of time. The research questions for this study are: (1) what types of high technology are state level child advocacy organizations using in their policy work and how has this differed over time? (2) What technologies have been adopted and then discarded? (3) What organizational characteristics predict higher levels of adoption and institutionalization? (4) What technology characteristics predict higher levels of adoption and institutionalization? Research was conducted with three waves of questionnaires (2000, 2004, 2008). Findings included that older technology remains active in most cases while new technology begins to emerge, some change in barriers were reported, and there were slight changes in perceived effectiveness and use by other groups.

INTRODUCTION

The nonprofit sector has been a force for the protection of children and the advancement of policies that would ensure the right to a healthy and sustaining childhood (Imig, 1996; DeVita & Mosher-Williams, 2001; Gormley, & Cymrot, 2004). Children are one of our most vulnerable groups and civil society is responsible for guaranteeing their care. This is part and parcel of the third sector’s mission to ensure the rights of the downtrodden, dispossessed and disenfranchised. Advocacy efforts can also be an important way to connect people with their government. This study
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does not deal with the status of children or how technology affects children. It is an examination of the use of technology by those who advocate for children at the state level.

While the goals of child advocates remain much the same, techniques used by advocates have evolved. Since the early 1990s, these techniques have included methods based on high technology within the advocacy process. While a considerable literature has developed about the use of these technologies within the nonprofit sector (Krehely & Montilla, 2001; McNutt & Boland, 1999; Hick & McNutt, 2002; Cortez & Rafter, 2007), very little of it looks at children and even less looks at the issue from a longitudinal perspective. The implications of this gap are significant. Since adoption of technology is a process that takes place over time, it cannot be adequately represented by a single data point. This paper will help fill this gap by examining a group of nonprofit advocacy organizations over three periods of time. This will add to our understanding of the adoption of technology in the nonprofit sector and further enrich our understanding of nonprofit government relations.

The research questions for this study are: (1) what types of high technology are state level child advocacy organizations using in their policy work? (2) How has this differed over time? (3) What technologies have been adopted and then discarded? (4) What technology characteristics predict higher levels of adoption and institutionalization?

This research is important not only because of its long term perspective but because it follows individual state level advocacy organizations. Due to devolution, many of the policy battles are conducted at the state level. These organizations have replaced national level organizations on the front lines. Like many advocacy organizations, these are tiny organizations with very small resources pools. They are much more representative of much of the advocacy community than larger national organizations that are the subject of much of the interest group literature.

BACKGROUND

The issues considered in this research cover three major lines of inquiry and a number of complex issues. They deal with the state of nonprofit advocacy, nonprofit informatics, organizational change and the overall mission and nature of the nonprofit sector and civil society. First, there is the literature on nonprofit advocacy and the growth of political technology. This is a growing literature and one that is mostly a product of the past few years. Second, there is the related literature on the adoption of technology in nonprofit organizations. These are complementary but distinct bodies of literature. This is also supported and united by the overall literature in organizational change and development. The literature on nonprofit informatics is also of relatively recent vintage and is rather sparse in places (see Cortez & Rafter, 2007). Fortunately, there is applicable material from other sectors that can be used. We will consider each of these areas in turn. We will also attempt to bridge and synthesize the available literature.

The Growth of Nonprofit Advocacy and Technology

Advocacy has a long and honorable tradition in the nonprofit sector (Salamon, 1994). It represents the sector’s ability to protect itself, to deal with social problems and protect society’s most vulnerable populations. There is also a need to protect programs that nonprofits offer for children and their families. Having said that, it is also true that advocacy is often controversial and that many nonprofit leaders feel slightly queasy when the topic of political advocacy comes up (Berry & Arons, 2002).

The tactics that nonprofit advocates employ parallels that used by those in other areas of the