Abstract

We are currently experiencing the third round of theory and debate on the "information society." This "new society" is being trumpeted as the harbinger of more democratic and participatory social structures. Among scholars, however, there is no consensus that the "information society" exists; many contend that the "informatisation" of life has been increasing for several centuries and recent developments are part of a historical continuity. However, new opportunities do exist to use new communication and information technologies, particularly the Internet, to extend democratic communication practices. There is a high level of interest among Irish community and voluntary organisations in using the new technologies but research suggests these technologies will be largely restricted to those organisations with the most resources, and that organisations may experience significant difficulties integrating the technologies in their work. The article includes suggestions for policy directions addressing the needs of community and voluntary organisations.

Introduction

At a Dublin conference held in the autumn of 1996, participants heard how the Internet - a global network of computers - is being used for voluntary and community action - to provide information and services, combat social exclusion, and promote democratic and sustainable development on a community, national and international scale. Among the organisations which detailed their applications of Internet technologies were:

* The European Institute for Women's Health, lobbying to put health issues on the European political agenda and disseminating information about women's health. On its WorldWide Web site, the Institute has published CanCom, an interactive, highly visual, user-friendly, and comprehensive source of information responding to women's concerns about cancer.

* The Ballymun Job Centre, working for the past 10 years to train and to find employment for members of this disadvantaged community in north Dublin. The Centre has been using the Internet for about four years; it is now fairly central to some of the Centre's operations.

* Irish Woodworkers for Africa, promoting the sustainable use of forests and wood
products. On its Web site, there are links to the international campaigns to boycott Mitsubishi, Shell and other multinationals and which national newspapers have declined to advertise. Many of these multinationals use the Web technology themselves to sell their products, and the Irish Woodworkers for Africa coordinator is "delighted" to be able to respond with similar technology at relatively low cost.

* The Network Outreach in Development Education (NODE), providing support and training to its membership of development education centres in Ireland (North and South), about half of which use the Internet. The two NODE staff members regularly use e-mail; NODE News, a calendar of events, is e-mailed every month to its online members (DCU School of Communications, 1996).

These four Irish organisations, and a rapidly growing number of others, are harnessing the new information and communication technologies for progressive ends. This article will discuss four aspects of this situation: 1) The "information society" concept; 2) Why the Internet is seen to be useful to progressive community and voluntary organisations; 3) Recent research on the Internet use of Irish organisations; and 4) Emerging EU and Irish policies on the "information society."

1) Theories and rhetoric of the "information society"

In the mid-1960s, when computing was known as data processing and the economies of the most advanced industrial nations were shifting from manufacturing to services, theorists proposed the emergence of an "information society." This "new society" idea, based on the notion that the production of knowledge was replacing industrial production, was believed to have strong social implications. Writers such as the American Daniel Bell (1973) envisaged that society would evolve towards more participatory, decentralised and democratic forms of organisation.

With the introduction of the personal computer in 1981, the concept of the "information society" received new impetus. The computer and electronics industry went through a period of rapid restructuring and global growth while it promoted the notion of a computer in every home. These developments influenced the restatement of visions about a new kind of "post-industrialism" in which societies with high levels of knowledge skills, or the capacity to develop those quickly, held competitive advantage and the capacity to transform themselves into more open and responsive societies. But while the "personal" computer is marketed and sold as a domestic durable akin to the washing machine or television, its use is still heavily concentrated in corporate and government offices, not in homes, schools or community centres.

From the early 1990s onwards, the rapid convergence of computers with private and public telecommunications networks placed a new emphasis on instant and universal access to vast banks of information and on rapid information exchange across geographic, social and cultural boundaries. The intensified commercialisation of the WorldWide Web from 1994
appeared to have given the "information society" a specific shape and form.

Among researchers and scholars, however, there is no consensus about what the "information society" is or even that it exists. For instance, Daniel Bell's theories have numerous critics (among others, Webster, 1995; Robins and Webster, 1987; Marvin, 1987; Gershuny and Miles, 1983; Schiller, 1981). In particular, Bell's claim that an "information society" exists when the "information workers" (clerks, teachers, lawyers and entertainers) outnumber the other workers is highly contentious because every occupation involves information processing of one kind or another.

Frank Webster (1995) notes that the "information society" advocates do not distinguish between quantitative and qualitative measures; they assume that qualitative increases (in information, information industries and occupations, and information flows) transform into qualitative changes in social systems. Many of these theorists have abandoned the notion that information has a semantic content. In classic "information society" terms, information is conceived of as a quantity measured in "bits." In a similar vein, Theodore Roszak has observed that: "For the information theorist, it does not matter whether we are transmitting a fact, a judgement, a shallow cliché, a deep teaching, a sublime truth, or a nasty obscenity" (quoted in Webster, 1995:25-26).

Webster's rigorous analysis of the principal authors in this field concludes that the work of theorists Anthony Giddens (1987;1985), Herbert Schiller (1996;1981), and Jürgen Habermas (1989 [1962]) stand up best to empirical scrutiny. These three writers differ in approach but all agree that the current era does not represent a break from the past based on information. Rather, the "informatisation" of life has been increasing for several centuries and recent developments are part of a historical continuity: the familiar capitalist endeavour.

Despite persuasive analyses which challenge its existence, the "information society" concept has become the focus of key social and economic policies in Ireland and the EU. Part of the difficulty in this concept is that it moulds easily to different political and economic contexts. A consultancy report for the European Commission notes that "people from opposite shades of the political spectrum ... could identify with and interpret even the same elements of the [information society] in their own manner and to their own satisfaction" (Nexus, 1995 vol.1:7).

Consider, for instance, that the vision of Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft software corporation, is largely constructed around companies and homes, seamlessly connected in a "perfect" marketplace without intermediaries. He also sees benefits for citizens' groups, suggesting that every local administration could become the focus for an "electronic community" and that "some institutions will have to make big changes as online communities get more powerful" (Gates, 1996:243-244). "The network [by which Gates means whatever higher-capacity infrastructure succeeds the present Internet] will bestow power on groups of citizens who want to organise to promote causes or candidates" (p.307).

In the US, one of the most committed champions of the "information society" is Newt Gingrich, Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, who sees "the dawn of a
new democracy" in which power is devolved to the citizens. Gingrich has been directly responsible for the development of THOMAS (The House Open Multimedia Access System) which he puts forward as a means of open, equal access for all Americans to the decision-making processes. Gingrich and the futurist Alvin Toffler, who sees Gingrich as a herald of "third wave" (non-adversarial, non-ideological) politics, are associated with the conservative think-tank Progress and Freedom Foundation which has called for the dissolution of the regulatory agency, Federal Communications Commission. Thus, deregulation and direct democracy go hand-in-hand in a vision which matches Bill Gates's "perfect marketplace." In the one, the intermediaries of commerce are displaced. In the other, the intermediaries of public policy and collective action are removed.

Underlying these discussions is a highly-questionable assumption that the market-driven model of the "information society" will lead to democratic social and economic development. But today, 30 years after the United States was described as an "information society," that nation is the most economically divided in the industrial world. The gap between rich and poor has been rising steadily for the past two decades, and the child poverty rate in the US is now four times the average of Western Europe. There is no necessary connection between the adoption of certain information technologies and greater democracy and equality. The Internet, often acclaimed as the democratic infrastructure of the "information society" in the US, is in fact an elite communications medium with access denied to millions of citizens who cannot afford to pay for the technology.

Popular discourse and evolving policies continue to assume that the so-called "information society" will lead to democratic development and social inclusion. It may be, however, that in Ireland and elsewhere the "information society" era will be associated with a widening of the poverty gap. However, this era also offers opportunities to use the new information and communication technologies for progressive ends.

2) The Internet and the expansion of democratic communication

Many community and voluntary organisations the world over are now using computer communications and Internet technologies. Building on the theories of Jürgen Habermas, the research of Lewis Friedland (1996) is exploring how these new technologies are being used to broaden the public sphere. Habermas (1989 [1962]) argues that the growth of capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries allowed the emergence of a public sphere which is currently in decline. The public sphere is an arena, independent of government and partisan economic forces, dedicated to rational debate and opinion-formation amongst citizens. The effective functioning of this arena depends on reliable and adequate information sources.

Friedland has looked at different models of democratic computer networks, including those rooted in social movements and community organising. His research suggests that the Internet can extend democratic communication practices by providing an avenue for collecting and disseminating information and a forum for public discussion and debate.
The Internet is a matrix of thousands of inter-connected computer networks. Since mid-1995, when the US government handed over the Internet's backbone to the private sector, the Internet can be understood as the public face of a global communications system owned and used largely by transnational corporations. However, despite the fact that the Internet infrastructure is largely in private hands and corporate and state bodies are the dominant users of the Internet, the same technology can be used by progressive organisations to challenge dominant social relations and support organised movements for democracy.

As early as 1984, key international non-governmental organisations had signed an agreement to use computers to exchange information, thereby creating an environment for the emergence of non-profit computer networks (Murphy, 1994:95). The most significant non-profit computer network to emerge is the APC system (Association for Progressive Communications) which by the early 1990s provided environmental, peace and solidarity organizations with a global computer link. APC is based in the US with affiliates around the globe; the closest APC network to Ireland is GreenNet in London. The global network has more than 15,000 subscribers, many of whom are small activist organisations. APC members have access to electronic mail and electronic bulletin boards, archives of e-mail on specific topic areas. Research on APC has noted its effectiveness during the attempted coup in the Soviet Union in 1990 and the Gulf War, when news circulated on the APC networks that was absent from the mainstream media (Frederick, 1993). The APC electronic bulletin boards also act as a mechanism for opinion formation and help decrease feelings of isolation by activists (Sachs, 1995).

Another successful computer network of community and voluntary organisations is HandsNet, started in 1986 by activists in the homeless and hunger movement in California. Today the network connects almost 5,000 community and voluntary organisations across the US working on children and families, community and economic development, rural issues, poverty, youth, community organising, welfare, and HIV/AIDS. The network offers a distributed database on different issues, and an editorial service which digests and abstracts 300-400 articles a day from US newspapers and magazines for network members. They also offer reports, summaries and state-by-state information in the different issue areas (Friedland, 1996:193).

On a smaller scale, Internet technologies such as mailing lists, bulletin boards and Web pages can be used by informal networks of users at relatively low-cost to exchange information in specific interest areas. For example, Internet e-mail and mailing lists are successfully being used by many hundreds of individuals and small activist groups to build global solidarity with the struggles of the indigenous peoples of the Americas (O'Donnell and Delgado, 1995).

Internet technologies can be situated within the "small media" spectrum of communications channels alongside video, fax machines, newsletters and bulletins, and community radio and television all of which have their part to play in mobilisation for social change. A case study on the role of small media in the Iranian revolution suggests a framework for understanding these technologies:
Small media created a political "public sphere"; they were channels of participation, extended preexisting cultural networks and communicative patterns, and became the vehicles of an oppositional discourse that was able to mobilize a mass movement. They must be seen as technologies or channels of communication, but also as the web of political solidarity and as the carriers of oppositional discourse (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, 1994).

Another reason why many progressive organisations are interested in the Internet will be noted here, with a caution. There are particular features of Internet technologies which some people believe makes them "inherently democratic" and fundamentally different than the now-dominant mass media of television, radio, newspapers and magazines. In this view, computer networks encourage the active participation of individuals rather than the passive non-participation induced by television narcosis. Technologies such as Internet mailing lists and bulletin boards can serve as a medium of "one to many" and "many to many" communication, allowing interactive exchanges over vast distances among many participants.

However, the caution is that the Internet is similar to other communications technologies in that its invention, development and diffusion is intricately connected with the dominant social relations of the times (Winston, 1986). A technology cannot determine social relations. On the contrary, Internet technology, just like all other technologies, is bound up in social relations such as gender and class inequalities and will be used in ways that reflect the dominant social relations of the world outside the Internet. This is why the majority of Internet users are higher-income men from Western nations. Despite this limitation, however, the Internet is opening new opportunities for democratic communications, and as the examples above demonstrate, many community and voluntary organisations are making the most of these opportunities.

3) Irish community and voluntary organisations and the Internet

There is clearly a strong interest in the Internet among Irish voluntary and community organisations. At the time of writing, there are four Irish Internet service providers dedicated to supporting these organisations: Connect Ireland and ARENA/AONAD in Dublin, and CINNI (Community Information Network of Northern Ireland) and a second emerging network in Belfast. Internet networking initiatives include: the Women Talking project of the Women's Resource and Development Agency in Belfast; the Glenarm Rural Network in North Antrim, CavanNet, Info Capital 2000 in Kildare; the LEA/NOW (Lesbian Education and Awareness) initiative; the ICCN (Inner City Computer Network) in Dublin; the TORC (The Organisation of Radical Communications) initiative; NODE (Network Outreach of Development Education); and the Inis Islands Telecommunications Network based at Cape Clear Island.
Strong interest in the Internet was also in evidence at the Dublin conference, Harnessing the Internet, mentioned earlier. The conference was an initiative of the research project, The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age, in which the authors are engaged. More than 140 people attended, representing more than 80 community and voluntary organisations. There was a continuous stream of inquiries to the conference organisers from the day the event was announced, and the conference was booked up a week before the event. The day-long event included "how-to" workshops, reflecting the project's plan to publish a practical manual on Internet use for community and voluntary organisations.

The conference included presentations by organisations using the Internet for a variety of purposes, including: to publicise information and for lobbying campaigns, to find and download documents without having to depend on the post, to find information unavailable in mainstream media outlets, to reduce the cost of sending international faxes, to make interactive information packages widely available to the public, to communicate with members and business contacts, to file financial and other reports to funders, and to publish a calendar of events.

However, current research indicates that Irish community and voluntary organisations may be experiencing significant difficulties integrating the new technologies in their work. The Dublin City University project, The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age, has included a survey of information technology use by community and voluntary organisations, and an action research project, the Dublin Inner-City Computer Network (ICCN), which are discussed below.

Survey: Levels of computer and Internet use

A questionnaire survey of 300 community and voluntary organisations in six interest areas - community development, environment and international development, health, women, youth, and religious congregations - was conducted in early 1996 (2). The survey found that the level of income of an organisation was the most significant factor associated with its use of computers. The percentage of organisations using computers and peripheral equipment in 1995 were as follows:

* For incomes more than 100,000: computers 94%, laser printers 70%, CD-ROMs 30%, modems 27%, and document scanners 12%.

* For incomes between 10,000 and 100,000: computers 85%, laser printers 46%, CD-ROMs 19%, modems 13%, and document scanners 7%.

* For incomes less than 10,000: computers 62%, laser printers 25%, CD-ROMs 5%, modems 8%, and document scanners 2%.

(The projected rates for 1996 were somewhat higher. The percentage of organisations planning to use computers in 1996 were: higher income 96%, middle income 90%, and lower income 65%. Note that the figures indicate equipment use but not whether the equipment was used effectively.)
Other factors associated with lower computer use, regardless of income, included: sharing an office with another organisation, having a focus on neighbourhood concerns (as opposed to a wider geographical focus), and having an interest in women's issues. Factors reported to discourage computer use included: lack of funding (reported by 82% of organisations without computers), lack of time for training, lack of technical support, and the belief that computers were not necessary for the organisation's work.

Regarding use of the Internet, the survey found that an Internet e-mail address was associated with a more sophisticated use of computers - many organisations using hardware such as CD-ROMS and document scanners added on a modem and Internet service as part of their general high-end approach to computer technology.

Again, the annual income of an organisation was the significant factor associated with its Internet use. Among organisations with incomes less than 10,000, only three percent had an e-mail address at the time of the survey, but for those with an income of more than 100,000, 27 percent had an e-mail address. An e-mail address was more prevalent also among organisations with an EU or national focus than those with a neighbourhood focus. Among interest areas, women's organisations were much less likely than others to use the Internet, particularly if they also had a low annual income.

One survey finding was that all-Ireland (32-county) organisations were more likely to have an e-mail address than those with a 26-county focus, but there was no indication if these all-Ireland organisations were using the technology to communicate across the border. To the researchers' knowledge, the NODE network is the only formal network of community and voluntary organisations currently using the Internet strategically to link members in the North and South.

Factors reported to encourage Internet use included: the need for better communication links (reported by 85% of organisations with an e-mail address); the need to be professional; and the need for better access to information. Factors reported to discourage Internet use were similar to those reported to discourage computer use: lack of funding and lack of time for training.

The questionnaire asked if the organisations were planning to use computer communications in the future, and based on their responses, a forecast can be made. By mid-1998, an Internet e-mail address will be a feature of:

* Two of three higher-income organisations (income more than 100,000);
* One in three middle-income organisations;
* One in five lower-income organisations (income less than 10,000).

_The Dublin Inner City Computer Network (ICCN)_
The project's second research area, the Inner City Computer Network, developed from a series of workshops attended by representatives of inner city groups, and facilitated by Dublin City University, at which the groups sought to define their computer communications needs and capacities. Six of these organisations, working on community development and particularly combatting unemployment, became the original ICCN subscribers. The ICCN uses the Internet for its operations, at first through a UK provider which allowed bulletin board and e-mail facilities, and then through an Irish provider, allowing the additional use of the WorldWide Web. The following information is summarised from a report prepared by the ICCN coordinator and one of the present authors after 15 months of the network's operation (Ennals and Trench, 1996).

The ICCN was established to communicate and share information by electronic mail and electronic bulletin boards. ICCN bulletin boards were set up on ten subjects of interest to the subscribing organisations, including: training, jobs, funding, and others.

While the bulletin boards and e-mail were available from an early stage in the process, a series of equipment problems delayed the organisations in making use of them. For instance, many of the modems were UK models that had to be modified to work with the Irish phone system.

When these initial technical problems were overcome, organisational issues restricting use of the Network came into play. These included a high turnover of staff members, re-organisation and refurbishment of premises, and inadequate computer resources.

More important, the subscribing organisations did not or could not make it a priority to use and develop the network. Many staff members simply did not have the time to use the system. As a result, most of the information circulating on the network came from the network coordinator. However, face-to-face meetings to discuss the network consistently had a good turnout.

It became evident that the planned means of information exchange on the Network - the bulletin boards - was not compatible with the processes by which information was communicated and stored in the organisations. For instance, none of the organisations had a systematic approach to sharing information among staff members, and it was difficult for the staff member responsible for retrieving and posting information to the bulletin boards also to share this information with other staff members. However, there remained a good interest in using the e-mail facility of the ICCN.

It also became evident that although the Network subscribers were all members of the Dublin Inner City Partnership, they had little prior history of exchanging information among themselves, and in fact, territoriality issues acted as a brake on information exchange. It did not appear that the existence of the ICCN was enough of a reason for these organisations to communicate with each other more regularly or more intensively.

When access to the WorldWide Web became available to the ICCN, there was a renewed interest in the ICCN as subscribers began to use the Web to search for information.
Recently, the ICCN was given a more extended brief to support the newly established Local Employment Services (LES) in developing their information and communications systems. There is an expectation that the availability of LES information on the ICCN will encourage the subscribing organisations to increase their use of the Network.

Discussion

The survey found that many community and voluntary organisations are interested in exploiting the potential of the new technologies, particularly the Internet. However, the action research indicates that organisations may be experiencing significant difficulties integrating the new technologies in their work.

It is important to point out, however, that many organisations are functioning effectively without using computers and have no interest in using them or hooking up to the Internet. Ideally, organisations should be in a position to make an informed choice about the possible application of computers and the Internet to their organisation and, on that basis, decide to use them, or not. The survey findings indicate that lower-income groups and women's groups, in particular, may not even be reaching that point of informed choice. Further, it is obvious that the Internet may not be the most useful means of communication in all situations, or for all community and voluntary work. There are many situations for which workers would prefer to meet face-to-face, make a phone call, or send a fax instead of sending an e-mail message.

The survey found that the most significant barrier to the use of computer technologies in an organisation was lack of income. This means that emerging networks of organisations on the Internet will tend to include those with higher incomes and exclude those with lower incomes, a situation that can lead to practical problems. For instance, it could create confusion or an additional workload for network members who will have to circulate some information by e-mail to the members online and by fax or post to the other members.

However costs alone do not explain why some organisations are using the technologies and others are not. The survey found some other reasons: lack of time for training, lack of technical support, sharing an office, focusing on neighbourhood concerns, and again, believing that the technologies are not relevant to the organisation. Organisational barriers to computer and Internet use were a feature of the ICCN experience. These 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.

As already noted, women's organisations were found to be much less likely to use computers and the Internet but another survey finding was that most of the people working in community and voluntary organisations are women; the DCU project will continue to investigate this complex issue. Environment and international development organisations showed the highest interest in hooking up to the Internet in the future. Some of these organisations had a low income, no premises and few or outdated computer resources. Clearly, there is not always necessarily a progression from high-end computer technology to
the Internet; the project will also continue to investigate these relationships.

The ICCN evaluation pointed to the problem of expecting that simply because the technology exists, organisations will use it to exchange information. For the ICCN subscribers with little prior history of interaction, the introduction of the technology was not a sufficient incentive to begin communicating with each other. However, while instructive, the ICCN experience should not be generalised to other situations. The Internet has been used in the past and may continue to be used to create new communities of interest.

Regarding the finding that lack of funding was reported as the biggest barrier to computer and Internet use, it will be noted here that the state is the primary funder of voluntary organisations and community groups in Ireland, and a comprehensive research project on this issue found that the funding arrangements hampered rather than facilitated the work of many organisations. "Funding was frequently ad hoc, insecure, lacked a clear commitment by an appropriate state agency, and failed to match the needs of the organisation" (Faughnan and Kelleher, 1992:18-19). As well, EU funding is largely based on a policy of flexible stimulation, which can be "profoundly disempowering in the long run" for community groups when they are "stopped in their tracks by the absence of the requisite external long-term assistance" (Varley and Ruddy, 1996:79-80). Lack of secure funding hampers the ability of community and voluntary organisations to build capacity within organisations, leading to problems such as high staff turnover, work overload, deficient or unsuitable premises and office equipment, and inadequate or inappropriate organisational processes, all of which are barriers to effective use of communications technologies.

4) Irish and EU policy on the "information society"

The discussion thus far has noted the following:

1. False or misleading notions about the "information society" are defining evolving national economic and social policies.

2. The market-driven model of the "information society" may lead to deepening social exclusion.

3. On the other hand, new communication technologies such as the Internet are potential vehicles for expanding democratic communication and information exchange.

4. Many community and voluntary organisations are keen to use the new communication technologies but are experiencing problems integrating the technologies in their work.

At this point, we will add another observation:
5. Evolving national and transnational policy options on the "information society" could encourage higher degrees of social inclusion and participation by community and voluntary organisations.

We are currently at a critical stage, when key decisions have yet to be made and social forces may still be mobilised to influence them. This view has been well-summarised in the phrase: "There are no facts concerning the impact of the Information Society, only possibilities" (Nexus, 1995 vol.5:i). The remainder of this discussion will review the developing "information society" policies and then suggest how they may be made more inclusive of the concerns of community and voluntary organisations.

The developing EU and Irish policies on the "information society" lean predominantly to the belief that the private sector should be left alone to get on with its business of exploiting the potential of this "new society," and that market forces will somehow deliver its benefits to every Irish citizen. The dominant "information society" policy discourse has assumed that the model has been defined and that it is now up to Ireland and other member states "to get on board." The emphasis is on economic competitiveness and on the supposed advantages of being an "early mover." The urgent and imperative nature of this discourse leaves little space or time for consideration of the social implications.

Within the European Commission, the "early mover" advantage lay with the Directorate-General on Telecommunications, led by Commissioner Bangemann. His 1994 report encouraged the liberalisation of telecommunications regimes to develop information-based industries and services. However, there is little evidence to support the belief that liberalisation will of itself lead to more equitable telecommunications services to citizens. In addition, Paschal Preston (1995) argues that EU policies promoting privatisation of telecommunications networks in member states will lead to concentration of private-sector control of these networks at the continental and global levels, ultimately creating an environment in Ireland and the other peripheral nations which discourages innovation, content diversity, competition and market entry into new telecommunications services.

In both Ireland and in the European Union, there has been increasing acknowledgement of the social dimensions of these developments, with repeated references to the dangers of a two-tier "information society" emerging, leading to divisions between "information-haves" and "information-have-nots." However, the policy documents evolving from these discussions do not seriously address these concerns.

For instance, in the introduction to its 1996 report, the government industrial policy agency Forfas states: "It is important ... that a coherent policy be developed that will ensure that all citizens can benefit from the changes taking place" (Forfas, 1996:i). In the report itself, however, there is no hint of such a policy. The citizen is absent from the analysis, which focuses on business applications of advanced telecommunications.

The White Paper on Science Technology and Innovation noted among the possible "unacceptable and undesirable outcomes" of the further development of the information economy, the "deepening of social cleavages, unequal distribution of access to, and the
benefits of, the information society and so on ... we must avoid creation of the two-tier information society - those who have preferential education and access to the means and those who are at risk of further marginalisation because they have not" (Department of Enterprise and Employment, 1996:43). The White Paper insisted that "the development of the new age cannot be left solely to market forces."

The Forbairt report, Ireland, The Digital Age and the Internet (1996) proposed, more concretely, "a series of seminars ... around the country [which] would help to inform local communities of the opportunities opened up by the Digital Age, and of the infrastructural needs of industry. The seminars could also provide an introduction to the key technologies driving the transformation of society, and open up a debate on the social and cultural issues involved."

Increasingly, international bodies such as the G7 summit of leading industrial economies and the European Commission refer to the "information society," rather than to "information highways" or "information infrastructure." This has strengthened the suspicion expressed by the author of several consultancy reports for the European Commission that the rhetoric about "people first" and fears of an information-rich vs. information-poor division in society are a smokescreen for the real agenda of liberalising telecommunications (O Siochru, 1996:34).

Partly in response to the strongly industrial orientation of the Bangemann report and subsequent policy discussion, the Social Affairs Directorate-General under Commissioner Flynn established in 1995 a High Level Expert Group to report on social and societal dimensions of the debate. Its "first reflections", Building the Information Society for Us All, published in early 1996, acknowledged that low-income people, the elderly, single parents and the unemployed may lack access to the benefits of the "information society" and in the concluding section, stated: "In particular, attention should focus on provision or adaptation in areas where the market is unlikely to meet needs. The participation of the target groups in the design, development and implementation of technologies is critical, as is the participation by voluntary bodies and NGOs representing such groups" (European Commission, 1996a:34).

However a later document, the 1996 European Commission Green Paper, Living and Working in the Information Society: People First (3), is much less concrete. While the Green Paper does acknowledge that some people will be excluded from access to the new technologies, it does not reflect the earlier report's conclusion that marginalised groups, and voluntary bodies representing them, should participate in the development and implementation of the new technologies. In fact, the Green Paper proposes a direct democracy model, with citizens using the technologies to access the government without any intermediaries. This vision, similar to the one of US Speaker Gingrich discussed earlier, negates the value of collective action and the vital role of community and voluntary organisations.

The Green Paper does state, however: "Social integration can ... be enhanced by the potential offered by ICTs to achieve access and democracy, and to combat exclusion and
isolation in all its forms ... [T]he transition to the information society also poses challenges to social cohesion. People living in isolated rural communities or in deprived inner city areas, people who are not in work or in education are unlikely to encounter, or to have access to, new technologies ....Realizing the full potential of these new applications raises important questions about the availability, the affordability and the accessibility of ICTs" (European Commission, 1996b:24-25).

In March 1996, the Irish Minister for Employment and Enterprise established an Information Society Steering Committee to advise the government on its "information society" policy. The committee was comprised of: 11 members from the corporate sector, six from government, two from the academic community, one representing trade unions, and none from the community and voluntary sector. Only two of the 20 members were women.

The committee received several submissions stressing the need to support information technology use by community and voluntary organisations, including one from the present authors which stated that "strategic financial support will be necessary to ensure that voluntary organisations and community groups will be able to continue to make a substantial contribution to all areas of public life in Ireland."

The Committee issued its report in March 1997, Information Society Ireland: Strategy for Action, published by Forfas (4). The recommendations did not specifically address the needs of community and voluntary organisations. However, it recommended an income tax credit for new computer equipment for household use, which may benefit smaller organisations operating from someone's home. The report also recommended providing public access points to the new technology in local communities, an area which could be developed by community and voluntary organisations.

A key recommendation was to establish an Information Society Commission to shape and manage the strategic framework for the Irish "information society." At the time of writing, the membership of the Commission had not been announced, and an independent group, the Information Society Forum, was being established to develop a response to the government report; this group announced that a key concern was making sure the developing "information society" would be inclusive of community and voluntary organisations.

As noted earlier, we are currently at a critical stage in the Irish and EU policy development concerning the "information society." With this in mind, we will conclude with a list of suggested steps to make the evolving policies more inclusive of the concerns of community and voluntary organisations.

1. The Irish Information Society Commission, and any similar body established at the EU level, should include meaningful representation from the community and voluntary sector.

2. Monitoring procedures should accompany all "information society" policies to ensure that the benefits of new initiatives and technologies reach marginalised and
3. Funding arrangements for community and voluntary organisations should be made more secure, to allow them to build capacity within their organisations and use the new technologies if they so wish.

4. The government should support the development of an indigenous computer technical support structure in the community and voluntary sector, including: training, technical support, acquiring computer hardware and software, and maintenance. Raising the general level of competency on computers should be the primary objective of this support infrastructure.

5. Funding should be made available to facilitate Internet use and provision of content by organisations facing specific barriers to the technology: low-income organisations, neighbourhood organisations and women's groups. An initial step would be to target these groups in existing funding schemes, such as the Department of Social Welfare's grants to voluntary and community organisations.

6. Telephone and Internet service providers should be regulated to ensure affordable access for community and voluntary organisations to telephone and computer communications networks.

Notes

1. The authors can be contacted by e-mail at: odonnels@ccmail.dcu.ie and trenchb@ccmail.dcu.ie. The authors would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

2. Aspects of the survey methodology will be described here in the hope that the details may be helpful to other researchers. Note that the survey covered the Irish Republic but not the North (future research on networks of organisations will investigate North - South links).

The organisations surveyed were selected by a stratified random sample, 50 from six different areas of interest: community development (urban and rural), health and disability, women, youth, environment and international development, and religious congregations. Of the 300 questionnaires distributed, 245 were completed and used in the analysis; the 82% response rate is very high for a survey of this type. The researchers attribute the high response rate to the high level of interest in the subject among the organisations surveyed, to the postal and telephone follow-up, and to two pilot studies.

Developing a sampling frame of community and voluntary organisations proved to be the most challenging aspect of the survey process. Researchers in this area will appreciate that there is no consensus on which organisations are part of the sector or
on how these organisations should be categorised. It had been intended to adopt the Johns Hopkins (Salamon and Anheier, 1992) classification system, but this approach was later rejected. The problem was that their system of categorisation - placing all voluntary organisations into one of 12 categories - is a mix of interest areas and activity areas. It was obvious that many organisations would fit into three or more categories. Women's groups, for instance, were listed under the "advocacy" category but many are also active in education, research, social services, and community development. A second difficulty was that almost all the listings available of Irish community and voluntary organisations were categorised by interest area, not by activity area, and none of the available listings could conceivably be re-classified by the researchers according to the Johns Hopkins system. For example: the NSSB directory of national voluntary organisations is indexed by interest area; the IPA Yearbook and Diary categorises social organisations by interest area; the Department of Social Welfare grants to community and voluntary organisations are allotted by interest areas, such as women's groups and men's groups. In addition, one major group of organisations had already defined itself by interest area, publishing the 1996 Network of Irish Environmental and International Development Organisations (NIEDO) Directory.

The researchers decided to abandon the Johns Hopkins classification and draw up the initial list of potential organisations by interest area. Advice was taken from the project advisors (who include representatives from community, voluntary, and statutory organisations) on which interest areas to select. It was expected that some organisations surveyed would have more than one interest, and so they were asked on the questionnaire to identify their interest area. Some organisations did list more than one and this was factored into the analysis. Listings of organisations were collected from more than 20 sources, and a master list was compiled of those active in the six interest areas. From the sampling frame of more than 1,500 organisations, 300 were selected in a stratified random sample, 50 from each of the six interest areas.

The questionnaire was administered from February to April 1996. As noted, of the 300 questionnaires distributed, 245 were completed and used in the analysis; about 25 of these were completed by phone. A further 17 questionnaires were returned incomplete; of this number, seven organisations no longer existed, six declined to participate because their use of technology was minimal, and four declined for other reasons. Of the 38 unreturned questionnaires, many had been posted to groups with no listed telephone number, such as small community and women's groups, making follow-up difficult. The follow-up included a second posting of the questionnaire with a reminder letter one month after the initial posting, and a reminder telephone call two weeks after the second posting. Where the telephone number was unlisted, at least one phone call was made to a large community organisation in the area to try to track down the number.

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 wide range and variety of organisations were included in the survey.

3. The People First Green Paper is available on the Web at: http://www.ispo.cec.be/infosoc/legreg/docs/peoplst.html

4. The Information Society Ireland report is available on the Web at: http://www.forfas.ie/infosoc/

References


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