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Civil Society Organisations and an Inclusive Information Society in Europe

Susan O'Donnell

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s there has been a dramatic growth in Internet use by civil society organisations in Europe and wider internationally. More recently, the European Union's information society policy has begun to recognise civil society organisations as key actors in strategies to address the "digital divide."

This chapter will explore the thinking behind this recent EU policy focus on civil society organisations, by discussing recent research on the role of civil society organisations in an inclusive information society in Europe. This exploratory research aimed at policy development does not distinguish among the different kinds of civil society organisations and their activities related to the information society. The discussion will then move on to research on civil society organisations and the Internet in Ireland, which highlights significant differences in Internet use both among civil society organisations and within them.

The central argument of this chapter is that civil society organisations do indeed have a key role to play in contributing to bridging the "digital divide" in Europe but that to understand this role, more user studies are needed. User studies can explore the complex social relations in which civil society organisations operate and use the Internet and other ICTs. These studies will be necessary in order to build more effective policies aimed at an inclusive information society.

Towards an Inclusive Information Society: European Policy and Research

eEurope is the European Union's central policy for developing the information society [1]. The latest eEurope Benchmarking Report [2] highlights the need for developing strategies for "eInclusion" and refers to two European Commission documents. The first states that: "a coordinated policy response to e-Inclusion needs to combine public and private efforts at all levels, involving Social partners and civil society organisations" [3].

The document goes on to say that: "The voluntary sector, comprising different kinds of civil society organisations, proves to be an essential stakeholder for e-Inclusion. NGOs serve as a valuable partner for public action due to their knowledge of and access to late adopter groups. Many of the targeted ICT awareness and training initiatives build on their potential to communicate new technologies in an acquainted environment... Civil society organisations prove to be highly active, attracting their 'clients' to the Internet and offering them online

services accustomed to their specific needs."

The second document is the European Union's Resolution on 'e-Inclusion' [4]. It calls on member states to encourage partnerships of all stakeholders by: "Supporting the key role of regional and local actors, social partners and civil society organisations, including their becoming producers of information and content and actively extending the benefits of new technology to the wider community."

The European Union's policy emphasis on civil society organisations in the information society is very recent and related to developments in a number of areas, including new research findings. In 2001, the European Commission contracted a study of the potential role of civil society organisations in encouraging a more inclusive information society in Europe [5].

Many governments across Europe have policies stating that an inclusive information society is a priority. At EU-level, the eEurope policy emphasises that low levels of participation and inclusion in the information society will increase social marginalisation by disadvantaged groups, reduce the potential for economic growth, limit innovation opportunities, and weaken social cohesion in certain parts of Europe.

Policy-makers also recognise that a "digital divide" will undermine the efforts of governments across Europe to provide Web-based access to public information and services. Europeans without Internet access and the skills or motivation to negotiate a Web page are often those most in need of the public information and services available online.

For information society policy-makers, a crucial question has been whether individuals do not use the Internet because of concerns with costs or through informed personal choice, or rather if not using the Internet is rooted in the wider issues of social disadvantage. If it is the latter, innovative policies and strategies will be necessary to bring millions of European citizens without the knowledge, skills or confidence to use the Internet to a point where they can make an informed decision about the role it could play in their lives.

The European Commission has recognised that civil society organisations play a role in social inclusion. In 1997, it published a study of voluntary organisations which found that across Europe, these organisations contribute to employment creation, provide a wide range of services, and encourage people experiencing disadvantage - such as the unemployed, disadvantaged women, disadvantaged older people, disabled people, and other disadvantaged groups - to play a more active role in society and the economy [6]. More recently, the European Commission made a commitment to include civil society organisations in Member States in the design, implementation and follow-up of the programme to combat social exclusion [7].

However, there has been little understanding of the role civil society organisations play in fostering a more inclusive information society in Europe. Early EU policy documents on the information society recognised a role for civil society organisations [8] but the most recent EU-level policy, the eEurope Initiative, did not at first recognise this role. A key task of the recent study was to explore if such a role does or could exist for civil society organisations.

The study was conducted by an independent company specialising in research on social aspects of the information society. The study included reviewing published literature and conducting interviews with key informants with expertise on the topic of civil society organisations, social inclusion, and ICTs or the information society. Twenty-three in-depth interviews were conducted in seven European countries. The key informants were selected for their expertise in the research topic. Some are recognised national experts and others are known on a local or regional level.

The people interviewed for the study were based in the following countries: Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Spain (interviews were conducted in Spanish and Catalan), Sweden, and the United Kingdom (including Britain, Northern Ireland and Scotland). Almost half the respondents were women and all had experience with research or projects aimed at fostering the use of ICTs by one or more of the following groups: people with low literacy skills and little formal education; people on low income or living in poverty; the unemployed or those in insecure employment; disadvantaged women; older people; people with disabilities; young people without qualifications; people living in isolated areas; and immigrants. Informants also included several working with environmental organisations.

Given its scope, the study could not quantify the extent of civil society organisations' activities in encouraging a more inclusive information society in Europe. The research was exploratory, gathering information about the experiences of civil society organisations engaged in these activities. The research suggested ways that the number of civil society organisations doing this work could be increased and their work improved.

The next section of this chapter will discuss the study's findings in two key areas: how civil society organisations are supporting democratic processes related to the Internet and how they are building social capital through ICTs.

Civil society organisations supporting democratic processes

The first aspect of supporting democratic processes is supporting the online political process - civil society organisations using the Internet to interact with local and national government and public authorities, including participating with the creation and use of government content online.

Respondents indicated that civil society organisations that are delivering basic computer training commonly encourage trainees to look for relevant information on Web sites of government and public authorities. Civil society organisations with their own Web sites may include links to relevant Web sites of government and public authorities, especially local authorities where possible.

However in many areas, government or public information is not available online, or is not presented in a format accessible to people experiencing disadvantage; often the language used is confusing. Government information online is rarely presented in specialised formats which are accessible to those with certain disabilities.

The information on government Web sites is sometimes out of date. In some regions, especially in Eastern Europe, governments and public authorities have made very little information available online and may be reluctant to do so because of a culture of keeping information to themselves rather than sharing it with the public.

Civil society organisations mediate government information online aimed at people experiencing disadvantage. Civil society organisation staff or volunteers can read the information online and pass it on in more accessible language to individuals experiencing disadvantage, or else accompany individuals seeking government information while they are online, interpreting and translating information for them as it comes up on the screen. Civil society organisations commonly print out information from government Web pages and post it in areas accessible to people experiencing disadvantage, such as bulletin boards on the walls of community centres - this is one way that government information online is transmitted to people who do not use computers or the Internet.

Civil society organisations develop their own information about government services and make this available on their Web sites, believing that the information will be explained better in the context of their own cultural situation. Civil society organisations may lobby government agencies to make public information more accessible rather than taking on the task of developing parallel information and delivery mechanisms for government information.

One interview respondent was developing a gateway through which disadvantaged people can communicate with public authorities. Opportunities are increasing for members of disadvantaged groups to use the Internet to engage directly with the political process, such as emailing authorities and participating directly in online consultations. However, civil society organisations continue to play a role of mediator between government and disadvantaged groups. People experiencing disadvantage may see civil society organisations as their representatives in the political process. Some activist civil society organisations encourage participation in lobbying and consultation processes online, alongside face-to-face efforts and lobbying through more traditional channels. Civil society organisations may encourage users of their community-based Internet points to access public officials through email to ask questions and voice concerns. However, this process was frustrating or demoralising when the emails were not answered.

Many individuals experiencing disadvantage have developed a distrust of government and public authorities, and making Internet tools available for direct communication with these authorities does not overcome this distrust. Rather, the Internet is better seen as just one tool available in a larger process of developing a culture of constructive participation between government and public authorities and people experiencing disadvantage. Concern was expressed by respondents that the transition to eGovernment and public information online may further marginalise disadvantaged groups who do not use computers and the Internet - they may be pushed into using online tools to communicate with authorities when they want and need face-to-face contact with people.

A second aspect of supporting democratic processes is expanding online content and the public sphere, referring to civil society organisations using computers and the Internet to

produce community media and other content online. This content responds to the specific needs of disadvantaged groups, or introduces their views and voices into a wider public sphere.

Respondents reported significant challenges facing civil society organisations in their attempts to use the Internet to bring the voices of people experiencing disadvantage into a wider public sphere. Most disadvantaged communities across Europe have low levels of Internet use. In a local setting, people prefer to discuss issues face-to-face, and often there are literacy barriers to using computer-based communications. Although Internet-based chat rooms and discussion groups for disadvantaged groups have been developed and supported by civil society organisations in many areas of Europe, respondents said that the results have been mostly disappointing, with a few exceptions.

Civil society organisations across Europe publish information online about the disadvantaged communities they represent or work with. The interviews suggested that civil society organisations in the Nordic region are among the most active publishers of information online for disadvantaged groups. Respondents from the Nordic countries have been publishing information on the Web for years and have also developed innovative uses for ICTs to make the voices of people experiencing disadvantage more widely heard.

Respondents indicated that among the most active publishers of online content are environmental organisations, and organisations representing particular disadvantaged groups, such as the black community, whose concerns are not adequately addressed in the mass media.

Respondents indicated that environmental organisations are active Internet users, particularly to share information on global campaigns and make their concerns known to the media and the public outside their own countries. This work has a particular importance in Eastern Europe, where environmental degradation can pose significant health risks to the general population. These organisations see their role as seeking out information on pollution and health risks, often from reluctant public authorities, making it available on the Internet, and engaging in campaigns both on the Internet and locally, working with authorities and local communities to find solutions to common environmental problems.

Respondents said that a major barrier to producing content online is insufficient funds and the lack of skills necessary to produce and maintain an information site on the Web. One civil society organisation in Sweden working on disability issues has two journalists writing content for its Web site, but this situation is rare in the civil society sector across Europe. Respondents working with immigrant groups report that language is a barrier and low resources inhibit production of content in languages other than English.

In general, the interview respondents saw the Internet as part of a wider strategy of communication and information exchange with their constituents and the general public. This includes printed newsletters, postal mailouts, information services by telephone, and more formal media production.

Civil society organisations producing community media and alternative media - such as

newspapers, radio, community television, community video and so on - may lack the capacity and the resources to use this expertise to develop new forms of media production using the Internet, multimedia and other ICTs.

Active campaigning organisations may orient much of their information production to the mass media; some have developed sophisticated strategies to create sympathetic relationships with journalists, and this can be extended to Internet journalists and Web editors. A respondent reported that one activist organisation spent several years developing a relationship with an editor at a top Web search engine; this relationship was successful and search requests for information on this topic are directed to the Web site of the campaigning organisation.

However, several respondents said that the mass media are not generally oriented to covering social inclusion and social disadvantage, and engaging journalists to write about the issues is a significant challenge, whether or not the Internet is used.

Civil society organisations expanding social capital

The study also found that civil society organisations were expanding social capital by increasing awareness and building trust in ICTs and also by using the Internet to provide support and networks for people experiencing disadvantage.

Respondents indicated that in regions of Europe where state provision of social and community services is weak or ineffective, civil society organisations are central providers of services and thus their use of ICTs for service delivery has an important impact on ICT awareness among people experiencing disadvantage. There may of course be a big gap between ICT awareness and use - many people experiencing disadvantage are far more concerned with daily survival than using the Internet, however aware of the technology they may be.

Respondents suggested that civil society organisations working with people with disabilities, and also women's organisations, are highly instrumental in promoting awareness of ICTs among their constituents. Immigrants and refugees, particularly those without dominant language skills, are also often introduced to ICTs by civil society organisations.

Civil society organisations encourage awareness of the Internet among people experiencing disadvantage in ways ranging from highlighting their email or Web address in promotional material through offering specific computer training courses for disadvantaged groups. Civil society organisations may offer computer training and awareness as a component of other training or service provision for people experiencing disadvantage.

Civil society organisations work with public authorities on community-wide ICT awareness campaigns to introduce technologies in a strategic and coordinated manner to sectors of the population with traditionally low use rates, such as older people in rural or traditional communities. In this process, civil society organisations can reach out to the most disadvantaged community members and use dynamic methods to spark curiosity and interest in ICTs.

The respondents suggested that civil society organisations build trust in computer technologies among people experiencing disadvantage, with time, if the applications are credible, accessible and affordable and meet their needs. Civil society organisations rooted in communities build trust in computers by virtue of their lasting presence and long-term work in the community. Some people who are suspicious of technology are also suspicious of change, and it can take considerable time to build trust in new ICTs.

In some regions of Europe, the potential for building trust in the Internet among people experiencing disadvantage is severely limited by lack of access. This is especially the case for public Internet access for people with disabilities. In Sophia, Bulgaria for example, no public Internet points are accessible to people in wheelchairs.

Several respondents believed that people experiencing exclusion should participate not only as end users of ICTs but also as planners and creators of ICTs; trust is developed as people become involved in developing technology for their own needs.

Respondents reported that many people experiencing disadvantage lack confidence in their own abilities and need support to begin to use computers and the Internet. Civil society organisations provide support for computer use as an extension of their general support work with disadvantaged groups.

This occurs by making training and contact around computers as supportive as possible, often through one-to-one support. Many people experiencing disadvantage lack the confidence to deal with online or telephone support services or cannot afford such services. Support also includes ensuring that concrete supports such as childcare are available to participants of ICT awareness and training programmes.

One effective approach to support has been to create an environment for peer support networks to develop among people experiencing disadvantage; this can be successful for maintaining commitment to ICT training programmes. Peer support networks initiated in a community or civil society sector setting can radiate out further into disadvantaged communities, so that ICT skills learned are passed on to friends and family members.

Towards a User Perspective: Internet Use by Irish Civil Society Organisations

The European study discussed above is a useful starting point for policy-makers developing strategies to address the "digital divide." However, the study did not differentiate among civil society organisations and the particular social contexts in which they work. User research on Internet use by civil society organisations in Ireland found that there are significant differences among these organisations in how and why they use the Internet and other ICTs. Further, research on the actual users - staff and volunteers - working within civil society organisations also found significant differences. These findings highlight the need for a more layered understanding of the role of civil society organisations in encouraging a more inclusive information society - and specifically, the need for more user-centred research.

The "Voluntary Sector in the Information Age" research

The Irish research began with a project, The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age (VSIA), which investigated computer and Internet use by civil society organisations in Ireland. The VSIA project was carried out by a research team at Dublin City University (DCU) from 1995 to 1998. Methods included a postal survey of computer and Internet use by 300 civil society organisations, followed a year later by follow-up surveys, interviews with 80 women's organisations and environmental organisations, and focus groups.

The organisations selected for the research were categorised according to interest areas - women's organisations, youth organisations, community development organisations, environment and international development organisations, and health and disability organisations. Further information about the research methodology can be found in the research report [9].

The VSIA research found different levels of use of ICTs by civil society organisations according to their field of Interest. Chart 1 illustrates that despite an increase in the percentage of civil society organisations with an email address from 1996 to 1997, there were still significant differences among organisations. In 1997, environmental and international development organisations topped the list with 43 percent having an email address. Women's organisations had experienced a three-fold increase in the level having an email address but the level was still markedly below that of environmental organisations.

Chart 1: Irish civil society organisations with an email address, by interest area

Interest area	1996 (percent)	1997 (percent)
Environment and international development	15	43
Community development	14	25
Health and disability	19	23
Youth	13	18
Women	05	17

Chart 2 illustrates some of the variables associated with different levels of ICT use among civil society organisations. The level of annual income of an organisation was found to be the most significant factor associated with ICT use - the lower the income the lower the use of ICTs and vice versa. There was also a strong urban - rural divide. However, income and location were clearly not the only factors. The study found that women's organisations and environmental organisations both had lower incomes than the other kinds of civil society organisations studied - yet as discussed above, environmental organisations had a much higher use of the Internet.

The findings from the interviews suggested some reasons for this disparity. Environmental organisations have a long history of using the Internet and campaigning in the public sphere, and many of those interviewed exhibited a sophisticated understanding of how the media works and had extensive contacts with journalists. Women's organisations, on the other hand, tended to work more locally and in face-to-face situations, and were not as oriented to using the mass media to spread their messages.

Chart 2: Organisational features and ICT use of respondents in 1996

Variable	Women's organisations (Percent) (n=42)	All organisations (Percent) (n=245)
Annual income		
Less than £10,000	58	30
£10,000 - £100,000	32	32
More than £100,000	10	38
Location		
Co. Dublin	33	54
Outside Dublin	67	46
Paid workers		
None	55	37
1-4	29	31
5 or more	16	32
ICT level		
No computer	38	16
Computer, no email	57	70
Computer with email	5	14
ICT equipment		
Telephone	100	100
Photocopier	67	89
Computer	62	84
Answering machine	52	57
Fax machine	45	80
Laser printer	36	56
Modem	14	37
CD-ROM	10	28
Scanner	3	15

Chart 3 illustrates another finding of the VSIA research - that significant differences exist within the civil society organisations working in the same interest area. Here we see the women's organisations surveyed in two categories of annual income. More of the lower-income women's organisations were located outside County Dublin, Ireland's main urban area, and had a much lower use of all ICTs surveyed.

Chart 3: Organisational features of and ICT use by women's organisations in 1996 (n=42)

Variable	Income p.a. less than £10,000 (percent)	Income p.a. more than £10,000 (percent)
Location		
Co. Dublin	26	41
Outside Dublin	74	59
Paid workers		
None	87	18
1-9	9	59
10 or more	4	23
ICT level		
No computer	64	13
Computer, no email	36	74
Computer with email	0	13
ICT equipment		
Computer	36	87
Photocopier	65	82
Fax machine	26	71
Answering machine	43	65
Laser printer	22	59
Modem	0	35
CD-ROM	0	23
Scanner	0	6

Case study: The Women's Rural Network

Another Irish research project research centred on Womenslink, an Internet discussion list used by women's organisations in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland. Elsewhere we have discussed the relations between Womenslink and an expanded public sphere [10]. The point of the case study in this chapter is to highlight the Womenslink research findings about the complexities of Internet use within women's organisations.

The Womenslink research methods included participatory involvement, interviews and a feedback session with Womenslink subscribers, and content analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted in early 1998 with 14 staff members of the Womenslink subscribing organisations. Other research methods were a content analysis of 500 Womenslink messages and a session with 12 participants from six subscribing Womenslink organisations in December 1999.

The differences among staff and volunteers within women's organisations regarding their use of the Internet can be illustrated by the following case study, which highlights some of the social relations shaping Internet use within women's organisations.

The Women's Rural Network is an organisation providing support and services to 17 grassroots women's groups in a rural Irish county in the border region (between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland). Of the organisation's three staff, the administrative worker and coordinator were interviewed for this study in early 1998. By the study period end in December 1999, two of those three staff members had left the organisation and had been replaced. The staff changes had a significant impact on the organisation's Internet activities later in the research period, when a new coordinator, an active Internet user, joined the organisation.

During the research period, the Women's Rural Network had an Internet email connection but none of their 17 member organisations - grassroots women's groups - were connected to the Internet. The administrative worker explained that:

Most of them wouldn't use computers and are operating out of someone's home. The majority of the letters coming in to put notices in our newsletter have been written by hand, which leads me to believe they don't have computers... The groups wouldn't have their own offices. They'd be running out of a church hall or a community centre (and) ... they wouldn't have a computer because it wouldn't be safe. Their funding tends to go on tutor costs, heating and lighting.

Her comments highlighted that financial factors significantly constrained Internet access in women's organisations. However, the financial factor was complex and there was not necessarily a direct connection between having resources available and using the Internet regularly. The Women's Rural Network was part of a special programme subsidising the cost of computers and the Internet - they received a free computer and Internet connection, and were reimbursed for the cost of their telephone charges for the time online. However despite the subsidy, they were not frequent Internet users at the time of the interviews.

All three staff members - the original coordinator, administrative worker and project worker - had computers on their desks but only the coordinator's computer had the modem and Internet connection. The administrative worker thought the Internet was "fascinating" but she and the project worker found it difficult to access the Internet when the coordinator was in her office.

You don't like to go and interrupt her and say you want to use it... If I had the access, I would be using it more often... I haven't gone into the Internet, email the past week. When it was on my own computer, I would tend to use it more but since it's on [the coordinator's computer] I don't want to intrude on her space, because she's very busy.

Her comments also described the situation in many other women's organisations where staff could not easily access the one computer with an Internet connection.

Like almost every women's organisation studied, the Women's Rural Network found that email was the most useful Internet process. On average, the organisation received about seven or eight emails a week. When an email message arrived for the administrative worker or project worker, the coordinator would let them know verbally that it was there. The administrative worker believed email was a "marvellous" way to organise meetings of her support group of administrative workers. The coordinator sent on average three emails a week, in particular to friends and contacts abroad: "Places that I've lived before, they send me emails just to keep me up to speed on what's going on." Her comment suggests the social capital value of email in maintaining friendships. The coordinator was not in the office every day and did not check the email every day she was in. She usually checked it after working hours:

I always check the email before I go in the evening, whereas I always check the post when I come in in the morning. It's because it's about changing your way of work and looking at things, and I've always had phone calls and mail in front of me when I came in but I haven't myself trained to check the email as well as checking the actual mail. So it's about changing your mindset and your way of working as well. The email is an afterthought... I haven't been in the office since last week, so I haven't checked the email. You're getting me at a bad week. We've had so many crises this week.

Her comments echoed those of other Womenslink participants who stressed that time constraints and reliance on familiar communication routines were restraints to more frequent use of email.

The Women's Rural Network had very limited use of the Web. The administrative worker explained that: "It wouldn't normally be part of something I would do," and the coordinator explained, again, that her time constraints prevent her from using the Web more often:

[The Web] is one of the luxuries I haven't been able to use. It's a time issue, I would like to use it more. Having said that, having used it, having tried to access stuff a couple of times, I found it frustrating to use in terms of getting the specific information that I need. There's limited stuff available on rural women, and I just spent so much time actually trying to get the stuff on the Internet... because time is the most important resource that we have... It ends up leaving you frustrated with the technology.

Her limited and frustrating experiences with the Web for information searches were typical of staff in Womenslink subscribing organisations.

Over the study period, the Women's Rural Network was the most active contributor overall to the Womenslink discussion list; however, most messages from the organisation were produced in the last months of the study period, when the new coordinator came on board. In total, the organisation produced 50 Womenslink messages, or 10 percent of the total Womenslink content.

The administrative worker did not use Womenslink although she knew all the administrative workers on Womenslink. She said that if Womenslink were to become more active, it would mostly affect the coordinator. The coordinator said that she:

... loved when the Womenslink was set up first, the discussion about the [Irish] presidential elections. I loved those debates because it's getting different perspectives. I like those more than the business/administrative [messages] because it's food for thought.

Her comment highlights the value of Womenslink exchanges for its subscribers, suggesting that one can derive value simply by reading messages. It also suggests that Womenslink, and perhaps email generally, has a value in being a "diversion" from regular work. The coordinator believed that Womenslink might be a good way to develop links with the other rural and outlying women's organisations, noting that the Women's Rural Network had closer links with organisations in the large urban centre where the women's networks were centralised. Even though the coordinator was not an active Womenslink user, she was: "very anxious to see it continuing... and expanding."

Conclusion

In this chapter we have described the thinking behind the recent policy focus at European Union level on civil society organisations and an inclusive information society. We discussed European-level research which found that civil society organisations contribute to supporting the democratic process and encouraging social capital in the information society in Europe. However, this research, while useful for developing policy, does not go far enough in contributing to an understanding of the complex social relations in which civil society organisations operate and use ICTs. User research in Ireland found considerable differences in Internet use both among civil society organisations by interest area and within the organisations themselves.

More user research in this area is clearly needed to build more effective policies aimed at a more inclusive information society. We can conclude with suggestions for the types of research that may prove useful.

First, research is needed at national level to identify the civil society organisations playing a leading role in encouraging an inclusive information society, in all regions of the country and at local and national levels. After these organisations have been identified, qualitative social research should be conducted at local level to understand their role, and to identify the restraints and barriers to their work and ways to overcome these.

Research on an ongoing basis should include qualitative evaluation of ICT projects run by civil society organisations, featuring interviews and feedback from individuals experiencing disadvantage who are participating in these projects, with an aim to improving the quality and effectiveness of the project outcomes. This should include the impacts on social networks, community development and confidence building.

A next stage for research should be to explore the processes by which these organisations act to mediate government content online to disadvantaged groups. The objectives of this research should include improving the mechanisms for designing and delivering government services and online content aimed at disadvantaged groups.

A further stage of the research should be to explore the supporter role played by civil society organisations, particularly to understand the social capital function of civil society organisations in increasing awareness and trust in information technologies among disadvantaged groups and more widely in disadvantaged communities. This would involve qualitative research in disadvantaged communities, featuring interviews and feedback from a sample of residents and key actors in the community.

Civil society organisations have a key role to play in encouraging a more inclusive information society in Europe. An exploratory study at European level has been useful in identifying policy directions and priorities but user research at national and local level will be the key to developing more directed policies and initiatives in this area.

Notes

[1] European Commission (2000) *eEurope 2002: An Information Society for All Action Plan*. June.

[2] European Commission (2002) *eEurope Benchmarking Report*. Brussels, February.

[3] European Commission (2001) "eInclusion: The Information Society's potential for social inclusion in Europe." Commission Staff Working Paper. SEC(2001) 1428. Brussels, September.

[4] Council of the European Union (2001) "Council Resolution of 8 October 2001 on 'e-Inclusion' - exploiting the opportunities of the information society for social inclusion" (2001/C 292/02).

[5] O'Donnell, Susan (2001), *Towards an Inclusive Information Society in Europe: The Role of Voluntary Organisations*. IST Study Report. Dublin: Models Research. (Available for download at: www.models-research.ie/publications/list.html).

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Biography

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