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Community intermediary organizations, community media and networking, and the Internet

Susan O'Donnell
National Research Council
susan.odonnell@nrc-cnrc.gc.ca

William J. McIver, Jr.
National Research Council
bill.mciver@nrc-cnrc.gc.ca

Vanda Rideout
University of New Brunswick
vrideout@unb.ca

Abstract

Across Canada, thousands of community "intermediary" organizations act as links between the various levels of government and Canadians, often people experiencing poverty, health problems, social isolation and other forms of disadvantage. Community intermediary organizations produce community media to publicize to the larger society the issues and events they believe are important, and they network with each other and with their community members to share information. This research explores the community media and networking activities of four of these organizations in four different Canadian provinces, and the role of the Internet in these activities. For our analysis we draw on fieldwork data including transcripts from interviews and focus groups as well as content analysis of texts produced by the organizations. Our research situates these organizations as actors within wider social movements and considers their community media and networking activities in this context. The research contributes understanding about how the Internet is used by this specific group of social movement actors - community intermediary organizations - and the challenges and opportunities for and barriers to using the Internet for their community media and networking activities.

Introduction

In Canada, health, social and community services are delivered to Canadians through a mix of government and community initiatives. Federal, provincial and municipal governments provide some services directly to the public and contract out other services to non-profit community organizations. Across the country thousands of these community "intermediary" organizations act as links between the various levels of government and Canadians, often people experiencing poverty, health problems, social isolation and other forms of disadvantage. These community intermediary organizations address the specific needs and advocate on behalf of their communities.

In this paper, we explore the community media and networking activities of four community intermediary organizations in four different Canadian provinces, and the role of the Internet in these activities. By "community media" we are referring to media produced by these organizations for their specific communities. The term "community networking" refers to their activities to link with other community organizations and community members. These organizations produce community media to publicize the issues and events they believe are important and they network to share information, coordinate their activities, and form coalitions for action on common themes.

Our research situates these community intermediary organizations as actors within wider social movements and considers their community media and networking activities in this context. Much has been written about the potential of the Internet for social movements. The current research contributes understanding about how the Internet is used by this specific group of social movement actors - community

intermediary organizations - and the challenges, opportunities and barriers to using the Internet for their community media and networking activities.

To contextualize this research, it is important to point out that many community intermediary organizations in Canada are experiencing a financial crisis. Traditionally the various levels of government in Canada provided "core" funding to these community intermediary organizations to cover their administrative and overhead costs in return for delivering services. Core funding ensures a level of stability for these organizations because it covers their ongoing administrative and overhead costs. However in recent years Canadian governments have moved to a different funding structure - a lower level of core funding combined with additional "project funding" to deliver specific services (Scott, 2003; Baines, 2006; Mitchell Evans and Shields, 2005). The move from core to project funding has gained momentum since the mid 1990s. In addition, since 2000, the federal government has been implementing an "accountability" regime that, combined with project funding, has led to serious repercussions for community intermediary organizations (Phillips and Levasseur, 2005; Gibson, O'Donnell and Rideout, forthcoming). Many of these community intermediary organizations are having trouble surviving - meeting payroll is sometimes a challenge and they suffer from staff burnout and high staff turnover rates. They are in a constant struggle to keep their heads above water, with many staff putting in volunteer hours to keep health and social services "projects" running.

Community intermediary organizations, social movements and the Internet

We are framing our research within new social movement theory. Using this framework, these four community intermediary organizations are actors in new social movements attempting to increase opportunities for their communities. New Social Movement theory was developed largely by European academics. Rooted in continental European traditions of social theory and political philosophy, it emerged to analyse collective identities and sites of action in addition to the "old" social movement of class struggle and proletarian revolution associated with classical Marxism. We see the four organizations studied as actors within larger social movements advocating for the rights of people with disabilities, people living in poverty, minority-language speakers, and the unemployed.

Each of the community intermediary organizations studied is focused on the community members it serves and their specific needs. The "Mental Health Organization" works with people with mental health issues in a large city. The "Employment and Training Organization" works in a large rural area with people who are unemployed, under-employed or who have skills or literacy deficits. The "Community Development Organization" works with residents living in a high poverty and high unemployment neighbourhood of a large city. The "Minority-language Health Organization" works with minority-language speakers in a large city. In addition to delivering services, these organizations provide information and support, organize activities, and advocate on behalf of their community members. To do this, the community organizations studied use a wide range of processes and technologies for community media and networking, such as paper brochures, digital cameras, email

and email lists, websites, fax, a community newspaper, postal communication, and telephones.

For more than a decade, researchers and popular analysts have positioned the Internet as a transformative technology that can assist social movements to mobilize and influence social, political, economic and cultural change. The new social movement theorist most identified with the Internet is Manuel Castells. Using Castells' theoretical framework, the community organizations in this study produce community media and engage in community networking to combat the marginalization and disadvantage of their communities and specific community members. Castells spent 12 years writing his *Information Age* trilogy: *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), *The Power of Identity* (1997), and *End of Millennium* (1998). A background to this work is his earlier *The Informational City* (1989), which analyses changes in the urban environment resulting from "information flows." His central thesis in this earlier work is that since the end of the Second World War and especially since the 1970s, a combination of capitalist restructuring and technological innovation is the major factor transforming society. In his trilogy on the network society, Castells builds on this analysis to examine in more detail the conflicts in contemporary society, including "the rise of the fourth world" (1998) - groups such as the working poor excluded from the network society - and social movements arising as part of the social transformations (1997). Castells believes that at the same time that globalisation and "informationalization" are transforming the world, they are also disenfranchising societies. Social movements are rooted in the resentment that people feel because of their loss of control over their lives, jobs and environment. In

his later work on this topic (2001), Castells identifies that social movements are built around communication systems by which they can reach out to those who would share their values and affect the consciousness of society more broadly.

The work of Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci (1986, 1989) is another new social movement theorist of interest for our research because his theoretical framework highlights the specific role that community media and networking play in social movements. Social movements, Melucci believes, have the power to reverse the symbolic order, through their alternative use of symbolic codes. Media produced within social movements can be used to alter and evade the codes imposed by mass society. Melucci believes that messages produced by social movement actors help the social movements to articulate and publicise to the rest of society the themes they consider important, and to enable political actors to receive the movements' messages more clearly. Media production within social movements can also be understood as a search for community, primary relations, and collective values. Melucci's work has been used recently for analyzing democratic media activism in Canada (Carroll and Hackett, 2006). Despite the title of his last book, *Challenging Codes: Collective action in the Information Age* (1989), Melucci does not analyse the role of the Internet within social movements. Further, he does not look specifically at the role of community organizations within social movements.

During the past decade, many other researchers have explored how social movements are using the Internet (c.f. Langman 2005; Downing 2003, 1995; Carroll and Hackett 2006; Downey and Fenton 2003; O'Donnell 2001; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1997). This research has documented and analyzed how social movements

have used the Internet to network and mobilize for activism. Other researchers have explored how organizations in the community and voluntary sector have been using computers and the Internet for their work on behalf of the most marginalized members of society (Rideout et. al, 2006, Saidel and Cour 2003; O'Donnell and Trench, 1999; Trench and O'Donnell, 1997). This research has highlighted many of the challenges of using computers and the Internet in the context of community and voluntary work.

The current research is a bridge between these two bodies of literature, with the common issues being the Internet and community and networking activities. In this paper we are exploring how these specific social movement actors - community intermediary organizations - are using the Internet for media and networking and the implications of these activities for social movements.

Methodology

The data for this paper were collected as part of a larger research project investigating the use of information and communication technologies by community organizations to deliver government information and services (Rideout et al., 2006). Fieldwork was conducted in 2005 with four community intermediary organizations in four different Canadian provinces - Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador.

The mixed-methods approach for this study included interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of organizational texts. The data analyzed for this paper included transcripts of recordings from 33 staff interviews, four staff focus groups and

four community member focus groups. A wide range of staff roles was included in the fieldwork: directors, managers, outreach workers, project coordinators, and others. The data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software and quotes from the transcripts are included in the discussion. The content analysis focused on the organizations' websites as well as printed materials collected during the fieldwork.

Following data collection and analysis, draft case study reports were sent to each of the four organizations, asking for critical commentary on the findings. The feedback was incorporated into the final report, adding accuracy and richness to the results.

Research findings and discussion

Analysis of the data identified eight main findings relevant to Internet use and community media and networking in the context of social movements.

The Internet is used regularly for community media and networking activities

Our research found that the community intermediary organizations have integrated the Internet into a broad range of community media activities. To give some examples, the Minority-Language Health Organization has an informational website, publishes pamphlets, and uses existing local community media, particularly local radio, to publicize its programs and activities as well as job opportunities. The organization also produces information packages that are posted on the website of the provincial government. Another organization, the Community Development Organization, has similar activities and also publishes a community newspaper

distributed widely in the neighbourhood and on its website that profiles community residents, issues and events.

All four organizations are also actively engaged in community networking. Again, the Internet is part of a range of communicative processes that include face-to-face communication, using the telephone, and exchanging emails. For example, staff of the Mental Health Organization regularly use telephones, in-person meetings and email to communicate with community members, other community and social service organizations, other community groups advocating for people with mental health issues, and international associations working on mental health issues. The Skills and Training Organization staff members use the same range of communication processes to network with community members and with a provincial network of community organizations providing services to minority language speakers. They also network to partner on health service delivery, to organize local projects, and to provide health information and support to community organizations in isolated and rural communities across the province.

The organizations are not using email and producing webpages effectively

The organizations we studied have little difficulty producing messages using conventional paper-based media such as brochures, documents and newspapers. Most staff can also engage passively with the Internet by searching through web pages. However sending email and producing an organization webpage is more of a challenge and so these Internet processes are not being used effectively. Most of the community media and networking activities identified in the fieldwork are indicated in the

following two tables. Table 1 below illustrates the activities using the technologies that are easy for the organizations to use.

Table 1: Media and technologies that are easy for the organizations to use

Media and technologies	Uses
Brochures - paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disseminate community resource information Disseminate information about programs and services
Camera - digital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce images used in brochures Produce images for community newspaper
FAX	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transmit information and reports to external organizations Exchange information about programs with other organizations
Newspaper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publish community newspaper
Postal communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exchange formal documents (often required) Exchange professional correspondence Exchange social correspondence, such as holiday card
Web - search engines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Locate potential funding sources Gather domain-specific information, including: labour market, educational, health resources and so on Gather information about external organizations Gather information for grant proposal writing

Table 2 below illustrates the media and technologies that the organizations find more challenging to use.

Table 2: Media and technologies that are more challenging for the organizations

Media and technologies	Uses
Camcorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record presentations for dissemination Make collaborative videos about programs
E-mail - attachments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exchange documents with external organizations Send information to board members
E-mail - interpersonal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate with community members Intra-organizational communication Inter-organizational communications
E-mail - lists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exchange newsletters with external organizations Transmit newsletters and information to community members Exchange information with other community organizations and coalitions
Telephony - basic (digital switchboard)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff-staff and community member-staff communications Communicate with external organizations Network with external organizations Communicate with political representatives Fund raising
Telephony - mobile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific needs for staff in mobile job functions, such as: bus drivers, staff who make home visits, outreach workers, and community gardeners
Telephony - voice mail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate asynchronously with community members Receive information from community members and external organizations

Website - organizations'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disseminate information about the organizations' programs and services
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As illustrated in Table 2, the media and technologies that the organizations find more of a challenge include sending email and producing an organization website. The activities associated with email and an organization website include networking with other community organizations and disseminating information about the organization. This finding is significant because email and web pages allow messages to be disseminated more widely - the messages can be replicated and forwarded endlessly at no cost. Given that these technologies are more challenging for the organizations, their messages are not being disseminated as widely as they possibly could be and so they are not being used effectively.

The funding crisis is a significant barrier to Internet use

A third finding is that the challenges of using email and producing a website are clearly linked to the organizations' lack of secure funding. Using the Internet is expensive for these organizations when the costs of computer upgrades, network maintenance and staff training are factored in. Three of the organizations studied have insufficient operational revenues and are in a continual state of stress over lack of funds. In this environment, the organizations have many urgent spending priorities other than information and communication technologies, and this has led to a situation where all three have inadequate capacity to use the Internet. In contrast, the one organization with sustainable funding has fewer challenges using the Internet.

For example, one of the organizations experiencing a funding crisis is the

Mental Health Organization. It experiences significant difficulties related to computer hardware, software and networks. Its computers, acquired through donations or private foundation grants, are old and incapable of running newer versions of basic software. Computer crashes are common. Some days the computers do not work and nobody knows why. The organization lacks capital funds for computer equipment and has no central server. Before it can upgrade its computer systems, it needs to upgrade its electrical power supply, which is prohibitively expensive. Because not all staff members have computer and Internet access at work, the organization cannot use email to communicate with its entire staff. The organization's client database crashes consistently and it cannot afford to upgrade it. It also has a "terrible" digital phone system that makes it difficult for community members to contact the organization. After attempts to upgrade the phone system, staff concluded it needs a complete overhaul which the organization cannot afford.

The organization's computer and Internet problems cause considerable stress because it does not have computer support staff. It tried using volunteers from the private sector for computer support but the process was unreliable and slow. The organization has no receptionist or administrative support staff, so all computer and Internet problems must be dealt with by the co-directors or program staff. It cannot find sustainable funding for computer support, ongoing maintenance, and hardware and software upgrades. The organization's website was set up by student volunteers from a local college. However, because of a shortage of human resources, keeping the website updated has been a problem.

"Our website it is horribly out of date... There was a staff person who was, let's call it web-friendly. But this person

was laid off due to lack of funding so now there is nobody within the organization's staff that has the time and technical skill to do this." (Mental Health Organization - staff focus group)

In a second example, the most obvious challenge related to the Internet facing the Community Development Organization is inadequate computer hardware and software. Its digital telephone system is also inadequate and it is difficult, sometimes impossible, to reach staff by phone. Its computer network was not operational at the time of the fieldwork and it has only one printer. It has no internal email system and not all staff members have an email address. It lacks software for anything other than basic operations. Staff often compile reports on their home computers. Its email system is unreliable to the extent that some staff members have stopped using email for contacting community members. Another explained that his computer is unreliable after having been permeated with a virus that he does not know how to remove.

"It has been better in the last couple of weeks but I don't rely on it, I can't rely on it. It's like having a shovel where the handle keeps twisting off. You use it because you have to but you don't want to undertake anything really big with it because if it fails on you you've got nothing."
(Community Development Organization - staff interview)

The organizations' websites are used to show public solidarity and support for community members

A fourth finding is that all the organizations studied use their websites as well as printed brochures to offer messages of solidarity and support for the particular struggles of their community members. These include people with mental health issues; people who are unemployed, under-employed or who have skills or literacy

deficits; residents of a high-poverty and high-unemployment neighbourhood; and minority-language speakers.

All the organizations produce messages advocating a community-oriented approach - underlining the importance of providing services and information appropriate to the specific needs of community members and encouraging their active participation in the development of their communities. For example, the Minority-language Health Organization produced and distributes a document on its website describing the importance of culturally-appropriate services and community involvement in service provision and community development.

"The importance of providing culturally-appropriate services to minorities is becoming increasingly accepted as the key to successful minority community development. Just as important, but not as well promoted, is the importance of minorities taking an active role in providing these services. Not only will their participation ensure a more culturally responsive service, but it will also improve the community's sense of self-reliance and cohesion, two elements that are essential for the long-term sustainability of a community." (Minority-language Health Organization, document)

All the organizations produce messages emphasizing the historical context of their struggles. For example, a text on the website of the Skills and Training Organization traces its history to the broader social movement of community action and community collectives in rural areas:

"The Rural Development Movement began in the 1960s when people felt they were being ignored by decision-makers. They banded together in groups of communities to try to solve their own problems." (Skills and Training Organization, website)

The organizations' websites are not used to publicize radical messages

Significantly, however, a related finding is that the organizations' written messages - on their websites and printed materials - are less radical than the messages delivered in-person, face-to-face. All the organizations produce written messages that position themselves as alternatives alongside the mainstream. They clearly articulate that their way of approaching social challenges is different from that of the government and mainstream society. For example, in pamphlets and on its website, the Mental Health Organization describes its mission in terms of being an alternative to the provincial government's de-institutionalization of psychiatric hospitals, which returned hundreds of severely mentally ill persons to their local communities.

"Unfortunately, there were virtually no community-based programs designed to support these individuals. Many persons with mental illness were discharged from hospital and became severely ill again due to a lack of available supports. They returned to hospital, were stabilized on medication and discharged only to become ill once again. This ongoing, continuous cycle became known as the "revolving door syndrome". [The Mental Health Organization] was developed as a grassroots organization in the 1970s by a group of parents with mentally ill children, mental health professionals and community leaders. It was designed as a community-based mental health facility to provide supports in the community to persons upon discharge from hospital." (Mental Health Organization, website)

However the fieldwork found that the discourse of the organizations' staff, including the senior staff, is much more radical and oppositional in person than in their organizations' written materials. In face-to-face communications to the researchers and with the community members present during the fieldwork, staff

members were often critical of the government and mainstream society. They questioned the wisdom of government policies and spoke out against what they perceived to be insensitive or uninformed social approaches to their issues.

This finding is significant because it means that the organizations have more radical messages for face-to-face communications, and less radical messages for written communications aimed at a wider public audience. There may be many reasons for this, including the fact that their government funders may not welcome the public criticism. Whatever the reason, the net effect is that written communications - significantly, the organizations websites - disseminate messages that do not reflect the more radical perspectives of the organizations.

Organizations prefer face-to-face instead of the Internet for communications with their communities

The research also found that many staff members interviewed prefer face-to-face over email contact with their community members. This preference may be related to the nature of social services work. People are attracted to the social service professions for the opportunity to engage personally with people. As well, academic training for social workers focuses on people skills rather than technical skills, with the result that many social services workers are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with computers and email. As one described:

"There aren't a lot organizations or coalitions or associations, committees whatever that we would [communicate with] strictly viz a viz in a technological way. It is usually face-to-face or over the telephone. So there is not a lot [of email use for networking] and I think that is because most people in social services don't have a

lot of technology background." (Mental Health Organization, staff interview)

The organizations' preference for face-to-face communication is illustrated by a photograph on the website of the Minority-language Health Organization. This organization is the only one studied with adequate funding and computer capacity. Among the four organizations, it has the most developed and up-to-date website, with all the content in two languages. Its website includes a photograph of its "Pamphlet Pathway" which can only be accessed by visiting the organization in person. The Pamphlet Pathway is an actual corridor on the organizations' premises lined with display shelves filled with printed publications. The Pamphlet Pathway contains many publications the organization could make available on its website but chooses not to. The clear message is that in order to access the information, the community members should visit the organization in person.

The digital divide in communities restricts Internet use by the organizations

Another significant finding is that the digital divide has an impact on how these organizations use the Internet. The "digital divide" refers to the situation in which certain social groups - such as those with lower levels of education and income - use the Internet less often than other more privileged social groups. For all the organizations studied, their community members fit classic profiles of low technology users on the wrong side of the digital divide. The fieldwork identified that the levels of Internet use by their communities is considerably lower than the Canadian average. The lower levels of Internet use by community members are a barrier to Internet use by the organizations working with them. When only a limited number of community

members use the Internet, the organization cannot use it for effectively reaching its community members.

The fieldwork found that many community members do not access and use computers and the Internet primarily because of the cost. In some cases, community members have a bad or no credit rating and are unable to buy a computer and sign up for Internet access. Community members without home computers and Internet access can - in theory - use public access sites. However the free computer access points in the communities studied are heavily used, making access difficult. In one community, there is no public Internet access for visually-impaired persons and in another community, none for persons using a wheelchair. Staff at the Mental Health Organization stated that public Internet access points are not often appropriate for its community members with mental health issues.

Community members' low capacity for using the Internet is a related challenge. Across the research sites, some community members are very proficient with computers but many are not and would need training in order to access and use the Internet effectively. Literacy levels vary, and providing written instructions for using computers would not be appropriate for many community members. Community members expressed a clear preference for face-to-face communication over email for communicating with the organization. Many do not use computers, do not want to use computers, or are not familiar with computers.

"One of the biggest problems is we could send them all [the email] we want but if we are sending a signal that they don't understand or are not up-to-date with there is no point. There really isn't because I met with neighbors here in the block who wouldn't have a clue when I was talking about email. What's that? Just common sense, like

what is that?... So I am talking almost half the population wouldn't know what a website is, they'd think about spiders." (Community Development Organization, staff interview)

Staff at the Minority-language Health Organization expressed concern for the large number of their senior community members, many aged 75 years and older, who are intimidated by many information technologies. For example some have trouble with telephone messaging and others are uneasy around computers and cell phones.

"A simple example could be the senior who all of a sudden sees the home care nurse coming in with their laptop, doing client notes on the computer. For a senior who is not very comfortable with technology and who just hears these stories, all of a sudden that can become very intimidating. So you have to be very careful that ... you're sensitive to the clients and the people you're serving." (Minority-language Health Organization - staff interview)

To address the digital divide, three of the four organizations provide their community members with access to these computers. At times, there are not enough computers available to meet community member demand, resulting in long waiting times and frustration. Only one organization - the Community Development Organization - provides a venue for community members to themselves become community media producers. Its community newspaper offers production opportunities for community members that increase both their networking capacity and their social capital.

Staff have different Internet needs and computer skills levels

Finally, our research found that the need for the Internet varies among staff members and that staff producing the community media and engaging in community networking activities have variable levels of computer skills. Staff turnover is a

challenge for the three organizations facing a funding crisis. None of the organizations has a staff training policy in place and in two organizations some staff members indicated their computer skills were inadequate. For example, in the Community Development Organization, some staff members are proficient with computers while others have only very basic computer skills. One said it is faster to write a letter by hand. An ongoing challenge related to staff computer and Internet training is the lack of funds to replace a staff member in training, with the result that staff members are expected to undertake training while also doing their jobs:

"You cannot have training while you're doing something else. So the person has to be replaced and that that incurs costs. They expect you to do the job, and then you know... you learn at the same time. As the phone rings five times and then, you know, you answer a whole bunch of other things, so that is not a good way to learn." (Minority-Language Health Organization - staff interview)

Staff with low computer skills will obviously prefer other processes and technologies for community media and networking. Another difference among staff is that some staff members like using the Internet more than others. There was no consistency among staff in the same organization or among different organizations. For example all the organizations have outreach workers who spend time outside the organization talking with community members and staff in other community organizations. Across the organizations, outreach workers have different levels of Internet use for community networking. The outreach workers in the Community Development Organization rarely use email to network with other community

organizations, whereas the outreach workers at the Mental Health Organization use it extensively, as illustrated in the quote below:

"A lot of what [the outreach workers] do is network - we are in touch with other agencies. [This city] has really good networking; we know a lot of other people from other agencies. We meet once a month and we email back and forth and just also information going out with the minutes from the meetings, updates, this kind of thing. 'Have you seen this client?' That goes back and forth, so there is quite a bit of email going back and forth that way." (Mental Health Organization - staff interview)

Summary and Conclusions

This paper explores the role of the Internet in community media and networking activities by four community intermediary organizations in Canada. We identified findings with implications for the Internet and social movements. The research highlighted eight main findings: the Internet is used regularly for community media and networking activities, the organizations are not exchanging email and producing webpages effectively, the funding crisis is a significant barrier to Internet use, the organizations' websites are used to show public solidarity and support for community members, their websites are not used to publicize more radical messages, the organizations prefer face-to-face instead of the Internet for communications with their communities, the digital divide in communities restricts Internet use by the organizations, and staff have different computer skills levels and different levels of need for the Internet and computer skills levels. These findings have many implications in the context of social movements.

Community intermediary organizations are engaged regularly in community media and networking activities to articulate and publicize to their communities and to the broader society the issues they consider important. This finding confirms their active membership in broader social movements on these issues. The fact that they are using the Internet for community media and networking suggests that the potential exists for these organizations to use the Internet to contribute to creating alternative symbolic codes and to the formation of a mass alternative movement.

However the organizations are experiencing challenges exchanging email and producing websites. The older paper-based community media and networking technologies are easier for the organizations to use. It will take more time before exchanging email and producing websites gain widespread use among community intermediary organizations. The organizations do use email and organization websites to network with other community organizations and disseminate information about the organization but they are not doing this effectively. Their messages are not being disseminated effectively, limiting their contribution to a broader social movement using the Internet.

The funding crisis experienced by three of the four community organizations studied is a significant barrier to their Internet use. The research found many examples of the organizations not using the Internet effectively because they could not afford the associated hardware, software, upgrades, maintenance and training costs. This finding suggests that until these organizations secure a sustainable income base, their use of the Internet will continue to be a challenge. This finding also raises

the question of the extent to which the organizations will be able to use the Internet to advocate for change from their government funders.

All the four organizations studied use the Internet to show public solidarity with community members. They all post messages on their websites that offer solidarity and support, advocate a community-oriented approach, encourage the active participation of community members in community development, and emphasize the historical context of their work on behalf of their community members. This finding suggests that the Internet - in particular the websites of the organizations - can be useful for establishing collective values with community members and other social movement actors. However the earlier finding about the challenges the organizations have maintaining the websites highlights the insecurity and instability of using websites for this purpose.

Another limit of websites is that the community intermediary organizations are not using written communications - such as on websites - to publicize the more radical opinions held by the organization staff. The messages on the websites are not as critical of government policies and mainstream society as those expressed in person on the organizations' premises by its staff, including senior staff. This finding suggests that the value of the websites is somewhat limited for creating alternative symbolic codes and contributing to the formation of a mass alternative movement.

Organizations prefer face-to-face rather than the Internet for communications with their communities, and as we have seen, their face-to-face communications are more radical than their written communications using the Internet. This suggests that the communication role of these organizations in social movements is more local than

widespread. They can spread messages more effectively at the local level by personal contact than by using the Internet to link more widely with other social movement actors.

The community intermediary organizations operate in communities with a digital divide - meaning their community members are using the Internet at a lower rate than Canadian society as a whole. This situation restricts Internet use by the organizations because they cannot use it to communicate with many community members. The fact that staff members cannot use the Internet for community communications gives them less opportunity to develop their computer and Internet skills and has the overall effect of lowering the capacity to use computers and the Internet by the organizations themselves. Significantly, although three of the organizations studied provide opportunities for community members to use computers and the Internet on the organizations' premises, this activity is also a challenge because of the lack of computer maintenance skills in the organizations and the funding crises all three are experiencing.

The three organizations facing a funding crisis also have problems with staff turnover. The staff have different needs for the Internet and different computer skills levels. None of the organizations has training policies in place and some staff members have minimal computer skills. The use of the Internet by staff members in similar roles is not consistent among the organizations. This series of findings means that the skills base for using the Internet is variable in community intermediary organizations and that the use of the Internet for community media and networking is inconsistent and insecure.

To conclude, we will suggest that the findings from the case studies of these four Canadian organizations can be generalized to other Canadian intermediary organizations struggling to secure sustainable funding to provide information and services to members of vulnerable communities.

On that basis we can make several observations about community intermediary organizations, social movements and the Internet. Clearly the organizations are actors in social movements and have ongoing community media and networking activities. However there is considerable uncertainty and instability in their capacity to use the Internet for community media and networking. The potential benefits of the Internet for social movements - replicating messages easily and disseminating them widely - are not being realized to their full potential by these specific social movement actors.

The findings support the concept that community media and networking can reinforce and possibly extend established social and cultural networks in the communities in which these organizations operate. Community media that are paper based - such as pamphlets - are more central for community media production than the digital media of websites. Tensions with using email and producing organization websites limit their use for offering radical alternatives to mainstream debate.

The community intermediary organizations studied are actors in the wider social movements struggling for social inclusion and rights for people with mental health issues, minority language speakers, people with skills deficits, and the unemployed. This research suggests that their specific role within social movements is providing strong support and personal links with the grass roots and local communities of people experiencing these issues. Their face to face communications with

community members may be more important to the maintenance of the social movement than their use of the Internet for linking with their wider social movements.

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