

# Philippine NGO Websites, Usage Patterns, and Implications to State-Civil Society Relations<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The opportunities that the Internet brings for civil society groups, from information dissemination to deliberation and from service delivery to mobilization have led scholars to anticipate it to be a critical resource for communication and collaboration with its stakeholders. However, such studies on the breadth and level of use remain limited, mostly on transnational or developed country NGOs, or focused on a few exceptional cases. This exploratory study aims to contribute to the still scant body of empirical evidences through an analysis of the websites of 193 non-government organizations (NGOs) in the Philippines. This study investigates the website features of Philippine NGOs: from serving as a platform for information dissemination and advocacy, creating an arena for discussion and dialogue, strengthening organizational capacity, online service-delivery, to mobilizing action. Attention is made on differentiating Internet use by accredited and non-accredited NGOs and draws important implications to state-civil society relations in the information age. The study is critical as it provides a much-needed empirical/baseline research for supporting internet use/efficacy theory-building, particularly with the civil society as the user-context. It finds that website usage patterns tend towards information provision with some promise for organizational strengthening and that there are functional differences in the way accredited and non-accredited NGOs use websites. Broader issues of civil society and the Internet, including NGO resource issues, accreditation and legitimacy in the information society, and emerging patterns of power are brought into the discussion.

**Keywords:** civil society, NGOs, public sphere, democracy, websites, Internet functionality

## Introduction

The Internet had been expected to bring a wide range of opportunities for civil society organizations (CSOs). As an alternative to the limitations posed by mainstream media for CSOs<sup>2</sup>, communication scholars anticipated the Internet to be a critical resource for civil

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an excerpt of a research study submitted to an Independent Study Course at the National University of Singapore. It is under revision for consideration in a journal—please do not cite without permission. For comments, please email [cheryllsoriano@nus.edu.sg](mailto:cheryllsoriano@nus.edu.sg).

<sup>2</sup> Some limitations posed by mainstream media for CSOs include denial of representation during certain critical stages and prohibitive cost and space for organizations that do not exist for profit. They can also block, ignore, or distort civil society viewpoints (Raboy 1981 1 cited in Stein 2007: 1). Tarrow (1996) also noted that dependency

society communication and interaction with their clientele. However, ICTs role in supporting civil society communication seem not widely understood. There is scant empirical evidence on the extent and purpose of civil society use of the internet, and if the Internet's anticipated promises would be true for non-profit organizations. Studies have been done on particular cases of social movements and mobilization online (Bennet 2003, Scott and Street 2001, Jha 2007, Van Aeist and Walgrave 2002), or particular cases of transnational movement activism, but these may represent isolated cases and do not give us some assessment of the extent that a significant number of civil society organizations are using the Web. Serious debates in blogs would demonstrate the Internet's potential for deliberation and discussion. But the first few large scale studies on U.S. non-profit websites show that such communicative function seems to have not yet materialized on a larger scale for CSOs (Stein 2007, Garret 2007). Studies of how developing country CSOs use the Internet are critical so that scholarship can move beyond single cases to understanding the institutional conditions that encourage or discourage optimization of technology for collective ends, and within specific contexts (Di Maggio 2001 319).

NGOs are selected as study focus because they have played critical roles in the Philippine society, like in other developing countries, sometimes taking on responsibilities previously held by government. Their general adherence to egalitarian, communal and democratic principles is also notable. While not all NGOs adhere to these ideal organizational qualities, NGOs are believed to be more likely to translate to equitable online functionality than the organizational qualities of their commercial counterparts (Spencer 2002 cited in Kenix 2007). Further, with their particular emphasis on advocacy, volunteerism, fundraising and relationship building, NGOs appear to carry a unique opportunity to utilize the Internet as a public sphere in the way that many early scholars predicted. Thus this paper asks the following questions: *For what purposes do Philippine NGOs use their websites? Is the Internet optimized by only a special few organizations? Do different NGOs (i.e. accredited and non-accredited) use the web differently and what implications does this have on state-civil society relations? In what ways is the Internet shaping the organization and operation of NGOs, and how do NGOs shape the character of Internet communication?* These questions and the answers to these questions are important because they offer evidence to the scholarship/theorizing of the value of the Internet for civil society communication.

## **Literature Review: ICTs and Civil Society**

### **NGOs and Philippine Civil Society**

Through the organization and mobilization of marginalized groups, citizen education, experimenting with "alternative" systems of governance, and articulating the policy needs of communities, NGOs are considered crucial actors in strengthening civil society (Clarke, 1998: 135 cited in Bantug 2002). NGOs have the capacity and the skills in pursuing long-term goals, influencing social and political institutions, providing effective communication and

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on mainstream media left it without the incentive to build permanent organizations. An example cited is the television, "which provides the viewers with an encouraging image of surging crowds, courageous leaders and colorful banners but leave unseen the capillary work that must be done to mobilize consensus behind a movement and sustain it once the first flush of public excitement has subsided" (Tarrow 1996: 21)

information channels crucial in the development of inter-community solidarity, and in supplying logistical support for collective actions (Berner, 1997: 56-57). NGOs are mostly run by middle class professionals and likewise employ people with similar skills and expertise that have the ability to influence social and political structures. This technical expertise of NGO workers provide for coherent articulation of community interests and their professional training puts them in a position as mobilizing agents and in engaging advocacy work to challenge government and businesses. Further, as they are community-based, they have the relative advantage of gaining a more realistic and pragmatic assessment of the conditions of the communities.

The Philippines has one of the largest, best-organized, and most politically active NGO communities in the developing world (Clarke, 1998: 136 cited in Bantug 2002). NGOs had become such a strong force that NGO participation had been mainstreamed and taken for granted in Philippine society for the last decade. However, as with the recent global trends, the genuine impact of NGO work especially their role in social transformation is scrutinized (Bebbington, et. al 2008, Racelis, 2008). The bigger context NGOs operate in have shown that numerous contradictions arise that hamper their effective and sustained intervention with needy communities. Their commitment for social change and community empowerment is also rivaled by their need to survive as individual institutions as well as to establish themselves as a collective force in civil society. Some NGOs, in an effort to stay alive, compromise on their vision and institutional mission to accommodate projects that may be inconsistent with the needs of the community or their main advocacies. Moreover, acquiescing to funder demands results in a visible shift from community organizing which is “process-oriented” to implementing measurable and quantifiable projects that are “output-oriented” (Bantug 2002). Therefore, there has been a debate between staying committed to the needs of the community as against satisfying donor demands (Fowler, 2000: 24). NGOs also compete with each other in order to survive and maintain operations. This financial vulnerability and dependence may push NGOs to engage in “questionable motivations and behavior” (Fowler, 2000: iv), such as imposing projects into their partner communities.

Nonetheless, NGOs and the POs remain at the forefront of innovation and social change in the Philippines, although ideological tensions keep Philippine NGOs apart from each other. A 1998 nationwide survey revealed that no more than 15.9 percent of families listed themselves as affiliated with POs or NGOs. While these figures may appear small, in actual numbers NGOs and POs reached 2,384,943 families out of the 14,370,711 total for the entire country, reflecting the influence these organizations have wielded in Philippine society (Racelis 2000: 161). These give them the remarkable capacity to pressure government into reforming specific policies and practices.

### **NGO Certification/Accreditation**

The rise in the number of NGOs in the Philippines was accompanied by concerns about government’s inability to regulate these organizations, especially inasmuch as the organizations have been obtaining funding from individuals and corporations. The Philippine government challenged the NGO community to establish a self-regulatory mechanism which could certify to the legitimacy, accountability and transparency of NGOs, particularly those

receiving donations from local or international individuals/organizations. In response to this challenge, the Philippine Council for NGO Certification (PCNC) was created in 1997. Organized by six major national NGO networks in the Philippines the PCNC acted to certify NGOs as eligible donee institutions after a review of qualifications pertaining to the NGO legitimacy<sup>3</sup>. The main objective of the PCNC is to enhance the accountability of non-profits and civil society organizations, given the charges of lack of transparency in financial matters. Only NGOs certified would receive donee status and donations to them can be deducted from donor's income tax.

The PCNC has certified 498 NGOs since its inception<sup>4</sup>, but there are approximately 70,000 NGOs in the Philippines, and only those certified are eligible for certain tax benefits. Thus, to the extent that PCNC is not able to increase the scale of its activities, many NGOs will have restricted access to donors or be denied of tax benefits. There have also been concerns that the accreditation process serves as a tool for state co-optation of NGOs (Golub 2006) and creates another divide among NGOs (i.e. accredited and non-accredited). Accreditation processes are sometimes seen as bringing NGOs *"too close for comfort"* with government and as captured in Bebbington, et.al (2008: 20), *"closeness to the mainstream undermines the NGOs comparative advantage as agents of alternative development"*.

### **ICTs and Civil Society Studies**

Empirical studies looking at website use across CSOs at a large scale (Stein 2007, Kenix, 2007) show that there is an imbalance in the way CSOs are making use of the Internet's opportunities. For example, Stein (2007) found that the majority of national social movements based in the U.S. are not utilizing the web to its full capacity and propose a number of reasons why this might be the case. Another study by Linda Kenix (2007) examines how non-profit organizations utilize the Internet as a deliberative public sphere; an opportunity for activism; an avenue for advertising and fundraising revenue; a space for marginalized voices; an interconnected, instantaneous portal for information; and as a medium to bolster organizational accountability, through an analysis of non-profit Web pages. Like Stein, Kenix found very little evidence of the online utopia once promised for non-profits and noted the high degree of "basic information" made available by non-profits online. Specially, Kenix found that *"none of the variables used to determine a deliberative public sphere was found to be (of) any meaningful degree and activism through non-profit websites was found to be almost nonexistent. There was little space for marginalized voices on non-profit Web pages and while information certainly was in abundant supply, it remained static"*.

It is worth noting that both studies looked at U.S. based organizations that cannot give us an idea of web-use by NGOs operating within a developing country context. NGOs have proliferated in the developing world in the past decades, taking on important responsibilities in facilitating civic engagement, community organizing, mobilization and delivering services that governments cannot provide. NGOs focus not only on addressing issues of poverty and governance, but in introducing alternative practices and paradigms of development, delivering services, and doing advocacy work. These are vast roles that require active communication with donors, stakeholders, businesses, and government.

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<sup>3</sup> For details about PCNC and its certification criteria, see the PCNC Website [www.pcnc.gov.ph](http://www.pcnc.gov.ph).

<sup>4</sup> The PCNC online database has 500 NGOs but there was a double listing for two NGOs.

Moreover, there are no studies differentiating the way different NGOs use the web. This paper puts special attention on finding any potential difference in website use between accredited/certified and non-accredited NGOs, attempting to surface important leads on better understanding the implications of the information age on CSOs and on state and civil society relations.

## Methodology

Given the huge number of Philippine NGOs (recent estimate of 34,000 to 68,000, Carino 2002<sup>5</sup>) and unavailability of a master list of all NGOs in the country, the research relied on available NGO databases. NGOs under the “Certified NGO List” of the Philippine Council for NGO Certification (PCNC) was selected because the PCNC list, being represented by different NGO networks, allow greater chances of getting a wider representation across different types of NGOs. Using the PCNC list sieves out "come-N-GOs" (fly by night NGOs), and provides some insight of the NGO's “legitimacy” and developmental work. Of the 498 PCNC-certified NGOs in its online database, a total of 337 were selected based on the following criteria: a) They should not be government-run NGOs; b) Not alumni-associations or societies or society chapters; c) Not associations of foreigners in the Philippines; d) Not educational institutions/centers; d) not international, regional, nor provincial NGOs that do not have separate national websites; e.) Not business NGOs that use the websites primarily for selling products.

Of the three hundred thirty seven (337), one hundred thirty nine (139) NGOs have functional websites (about eight have websites listed but not functional). The website URLs were gathered from NGO directory listings and were searched up to the fourth page of *google* and *msn*. To supplement the study and identify a basis for comparing accreditation effects, an additional fifty four (54) non-PCNC accredited organizations were selected<sup>6</sup>. This is to further illuminate if civil society groups use the Internet differently, and if accredited NGOs would tend to use the Web differently from non-accredited NGOs. Some of these 54 non-accredited NGOs do not have offline presence/offices and have been formed online. The website features of the 193 NGOs that have functional websites are explored. Websites are used as focus of review as it serves as one of the main platforms for interface of the associations with their members, partners, clients, and potential donors.

A survey of the CSOs was conducted to determine the degree to which their Web sites promote or enable: 1.) dissemination of information, 2.) interaction, discourse and dialogue, 3.) online service delivery; 4.) internal organizational activities (including raising funds and building lateral networks), and 5) mobilizing action (including group formation). The survey gathered data on a variety of indicators/features in NGO websites, which were categorized according to the above communication functions (See Annex A). The data is compiled based on the frequency of each activity and aggregated the data to describe the percentage of organizations that made high uses of the Web to engage in each of these

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<sup>5</sup> The big range of estimates of Philippine NGOs is due to the varying definitions different organizations attach to “NGOs”.

<sup>6</sup> Due to the absence of a database, it is almost impossible to draw a representative sample of non-accredited Philippine NGO websites. For this paper, non-accredited Philippine NGOs appearing in the first pages of *google* and *msn* were used, as well as NGOs that were linked to PCNC-accredited NGO websites.

communication functions. Website reviews were undertaken during February to March 2008<sup>7</sup>. To complement website content analysis, an online survey of nine items was sent to the NGOs with available email addresses to determine their perception on the value of the Internet as a communication resource, perceived advantages and disadvantages of Internet/website use, and constraints faced in the utilization of the Internet. They were also asked to identify plans to expand website use. Non-accredited NGOs were asked to provide reasons for not seeking accreditation<sup>8</sup>.

## **Findings and Discussion**

All NGOs that responded to the online survey considered the Internet as a very important information and communication resource. However, NGO website analysis showed moderate to high levels of activity in significant numbers in only two areas: information dissemination and organizational strengthening.

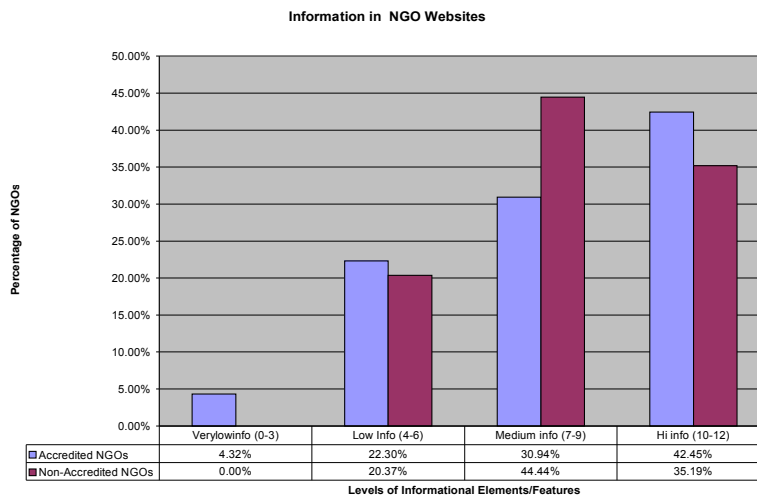
Over half of NGOs surveyed provided medium to high levels of information online, the most common forms being contact information, mission-vision-objectives, names of officers or staff and departments, organizational descriptions, project descriptions, reports on activities or actions, news on upcoming events, and organizational histories. About 34.7% of the NGOs belong to the “medium” group, while about forty percent of the Web sites provided high levels of information. Some of the NGOs that provide the highest levels of information included, apart from the aforementioned common informational features, online resources (i.e. downloadable articles or essays), speeches/messages/testimonies; FAQs, and an information search engine. Among the least reported informational activities are the availability of photographs or video streaming of some organizational activities/events. The findings show that accredited and non-accredited NGOs do not differ significantly in terms of informational website features online although a higher percentage of accredited NGOs surveyed have higher levels of informational features in their websites in comparison with non-accredited NGOs (See Fig 1).

### **Fig.1 Information Dissemination Features in NGO Websites**

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<sup>7</sup> It is noted that websites have the tendency to appear, change or disappear without warning and URLs reviewed in this paper were valid and working until the end of March 2008.

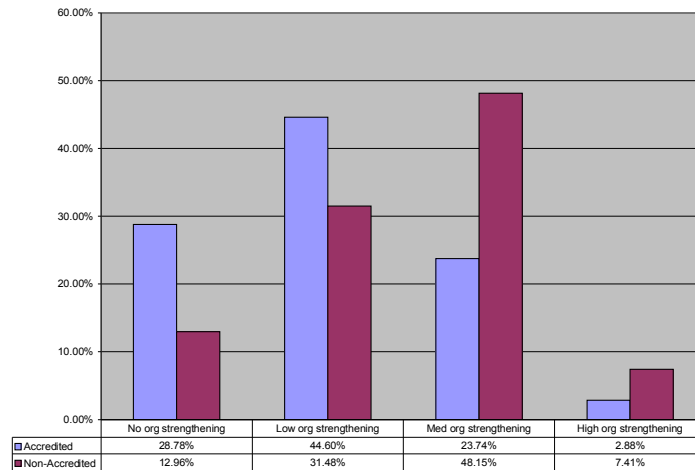
<sup>8</sup> While some one hundred twenty nine (129) questionnaires were sent to NGOs in the sample that have available email addresses, thirty two (32) messages were immediately returned back by the system, indicating that the email addresses were not functional. Nine (9) NGOs responded by emailing back the accomplished questionnaire. A telephone interview was conducted to an additional seven (7) NGOs that had non-functioning email addresses. This translates to a response rate of 16.5%.



The website analysis reflected a direction taken by NGOs to tap the websites for organizational strengthening. The Web allows NGOs to solicit broader participation in resource mobilization (i.e. financial/volunteer support for their activities, posting of job or support opportunities, or using online advertisements), or facilitate internal communication and other organizational development activities. They can use the Internet for facilitating an exchange among members' experiences, organizing internal activities/events online, obtain feedback from web users, or establish linkages with other organizations. Although 24.4% percent of the NGOs did not engage in any form of internal organizational activities on the Web, nearly 41% engaged in low levels and 30.6% in medium levels of organizational strengthening. A significant number of NGOs allow for feedback or comments on the organization and its website, and over sixty percent establish linkages with other organizations (i.e. post links to websites of similar organizations or associations within their networks). A little less than half of surveyed NGOs (48.7%) enabled new members or volunteers to join their organizations online. Other internal organizational activities conducted on the Web, though to a lesser extent, included posting job opportunities online, sharing of experiences of NGO members, organizing events, providing support services or advice, allowing members to renew membership, and discussing internal organizational strategies. About thirty five of the NGOs organized internal events online. Twenty two percent use the websites as a facility for sharing their members' work experiences. On average, the groups engaged in about 2-4 organizational activities online. About 33 percent of the groups surveyed engaged in some Web-based fundraising (i.e. soliciting donations online, or a facility for posting online pledges). Eighteen percent of groups sold subscriptions to services or products and carried some form of online advertising.

As expected, accredited NGOs (39.5%) have greater fund-raising facility online than non-accredited NGOs (15%). However, as a whole, non-accredited organizations seem to be using the websites more for a variety of organizational strengthening activities (i.e. getting feedback, establishing linkages, and organizing online and attracting members).

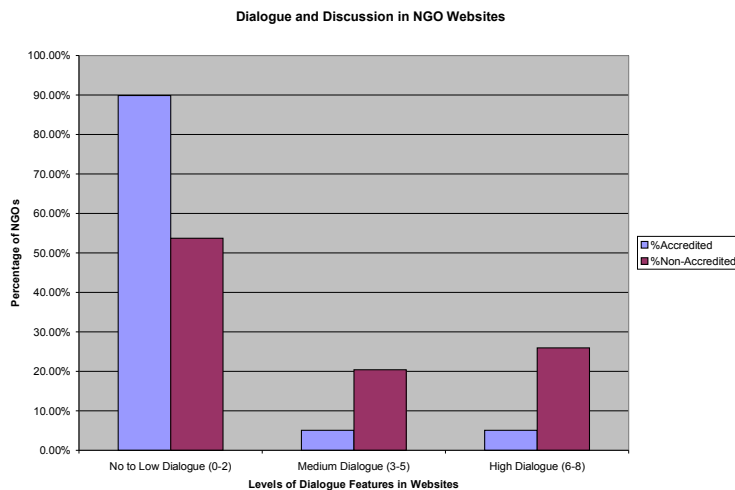
**Fig 2. Organizational Strengthening in NGO Websites<sup>9</sup>**



Substantial activity across the other communication functions was uniformly lower, with only about less than thirty percent engaging in mobilization, and close to 80% with low to no dialogue (See Fig 3). Although the Web makes possible the creation of interactive forums for the conversation or dialogue among NGO officers, donor institutions, members, supporters and between supporters and the broader public, promoting dialog and discourse was among the least utilized communication function of the sites examined. Seventy-nine percent (79.3%) of the organizations undertook less than two activities in this area, while close to seventy percent (69.4%) do not have any facility for facilitating dialogue or discussion in their respective websites. Only slightly more than nine percent (9%) of the NGOs promoted interaction and dialog at medium levels, and just a little over ten percent (10%) engaged in high levels of dialog and discussion. The more common activities within this variable included hosting bulletin boards and opportunities for participants to post their perspectives or initiate discussion topics on the Web site. However, most of the discussion boards were empty, while a few contained some 2-3 posts, mostly by the administrators. Majority of both accredited and non-accredited organizations display none to very low levels of dialogue or discussion features in their websites. A higher percentage of non-accredited organizations tend to have more (medium to high levels) discussion and dialogue features and activities in their websites than accredited NGOs and the chi square statistic ( $\chi=15.13$ ,  $p=.002$ ) showed this to be statistically significant.

**Fig. 3 Discussion and Dialogue Features in NGO Websites**

<sup>9</sup> A greater percentage of accredited NGOs tended to have less organizational strengthening features in their websites, while non-accredited NGOs reflected more org strengthening features. The chi square statistic showed this to be statistically significant:  $\chi=15.13$ ,  $p=.002$



NGOs can also take advantage of the Web to deliver services. The study finds, however that among all features reviewed, online services gained second to the highest percentage of NGOs without it (60.10%). Seventy one percent (100 of 139) of accredited and close to 30% of non-accredited NGOs do not offer any online services. In total, ninety four percent of NGOs surveyed have less than two (2) online services being offered.

Close to one-third of the NGOs surveyed (73%) do not reflect online mobilization, campaigns, petitions, or group formation activities online. A majority of NGOs that displayed some form of online mobilization included petitions or advocacy campaigns. About four to five NGOs called for action (i.e. whether in the form of street protest, banning of products, or supporting energy conservation). Sixty one percent of non-accredited NGOs surveyed had some form of online mobilization while more than 80% of accredited NGOs had no form of mobilization or call to action in their websites.

### **Accreditation, the Internet, and Rethinking NGO Legitimacy**

Accredited NGOs reflect a different pattern of website use from non-accredited NGOs. Accredited NGO websites were largely limited to the information provision realm, and only a few offered a facility for organizational strengthening. Even the facility for fund-raising and volunteer mobilization is limited. A lower number offered discussion features or mobilized collective action. The findings may imply that accredited NGOs must be careful in becoming like government in terms of promoting a unidirectional online conversation with its stakeholders (a common critique of government processes). Most Philippine weblogs reflect high levels of information, discussion and sometimes, even mobilization, and it was a surprise to see even NGO websites that have discussion facilities to be empty. This stark contrast shows that the dynamism that we see in Philippine online communities and blogs is a representation of still a few voices.

Questions on the legitimacy of NGOs and the Internet also poses some important issues. The Internet can bring about new forms of organizing and fund generation for organizations. First, NGOs can use ICTs for establishing legitimacy by raising organizational transparency and involve people in their ideals, mission and work. Secondly, Internet can help them process information, create awareness and draw support or ideas from people who may just be interested, without the need for taking up formal membership or offline presence (Vedder 2003). Thus, good web presence for organizations may allow them to attract funders

and supporters directly without going through certification or accreditation processes that were criticized to be tedious in the first place (USAID, n.d.). This possibly explains the fifteen percent (15%) of non-accredited NGOs that already have online fund raising facility. The image that the NGO depicts online becomes critical when appealing to an audience of local and international funders and individuals looking for organizations to support. The quality of website content, the level of substantive information, deliberation, program explanation, or services, would in an information society show some proof of organizational capacity and legitimacy. As argued by A. Vedder (2003: 54), *“when NGOs are also exclusively active through the Internet (e.g., McSpotlight and Cokewatch), requirements of legitimacy and accountability run the risk of being easily pushed aside”*. The way NGOs are able to present themselves through the website, complemented by a membership or volunteer facility, may also help NGOs in improving its human resource capacity. Potential members and volunteers will want to know about the “legitimacy” of the organization they are joining. Information on projects being undertaken, financial or operational reports, membership, resources, and linkages to other important organizations would serve as a vignette capturing an organization’s capacity or legitimacy.

In this regard, the requirement of IT capacity for NGOs to gain substantial web presence may have some implications on the nature of the NGOs. Some fear that the drive for professionalism across NGOs that is essential to accreditation will undermine the spirit of voluntarism that the activists who pioneered this field brought with them. Enhancing web presence, being seen as a tool to establish legitimacy in an information society like accreditation and certification processes, would require additional resources, some degree of professionalization, enhanced staff skills, and so on. Good web presence can also mean greater transparency. However, with the NGO community becoming like a regular government or business agency, people may view joining the sector as any other job and undermine the very essence of working for development (Constantino-David 1997 cited in Carino 2002), and ironic to NGOs being alternatives or different from government or businesses. NGOs will be forced to pay staff with web development skills at relatively higher rates.

This is the same critique thrown at the implication of the certification and accreditation process on NGOs. As explained by Ferrer (cited in Carino 2002:288) *“Critical collaborations with the state requires new skills and investment in time and resources in new types of activities. Increasingly, the non-profit sector is seeking and wanting the advantages of efficiency and professionalism of the profit sector. This realization has set new criteria for staff recruitment. Professionalism is becoming a standard that funders are more and more applying to requests for financial support.”* This may have strong implications for smaller NGOs that may have genuine activities to help the poor, but do not have the capacity to represent themselves well online. To borrow the phrase used by Golub (2008) that “in a society where form sometimes substitutes for substance”, NGOs that have better capacity in projecting themselves as “credible” organizations online may get the attention of donors from smaller, resource thin organizations that have genuine agenda, but cannot set-up a meager website. This study’s findings has important implications to donors and larger NGOs/NGO coalitions as to possible ways they can assist smaller NGOs.

## **Resource Constraints: Social and Economic Issues Surrounding Internet Use by NGOs**

While still a debated issue, the Internet is believed to carry out a status of a free zone. As Rodman (2003 cited in Schules 2005) argues, part of the Internet's appeal is that it is resistant to centralized control, offering an "egalitarian space" where it is impossible to be controlled by a few business conglomerates. As argued by Rheingold (2003) and Harrasim (2003), online communities erase social status because visual cues that trigger social divisions are absent. The Internet is viewed a unique technology in that it provides universal access to information and knowledge, affording the "same powerful capabilities to everyone who has access to the network no matter where they are". This equality of access is a key reason why the Internet fosters innovation. Anyone with a possible solution can simply connect to the Internet to see if the solution works or might be seen by others as useful (Lessig 2001, Lallana and Soriano 2008).

However, this study finds some of the major constraints in web use across NGOs as reflective of the major problematic areas when discussing the Internet as egalitarian in Rodman (2003, cited in Schules 2005). First, the Internet has very strong ties to the economic system and the market, clearly manifested by those who have access to it across countries, regions and income groups. Secondly, participation in the web requires some level of education and literacy that discriminate against certain groups. Third, it remains largely dominated by English to which certain groups of people may not have functional access, or for certain groups to resist. Finally, the hierarchical structure of the Internet still gives a person or a set of people control over chatroom discussions, in terms of who will have access and what can be posted.

From the online survey, most of the NGO leaders noted resource constraints as reasons for not optimizing the Internet's functions fully. Almost all respondents noted that they have plans to further optimize website use (particular responses pointed to using the Internet for fund-raising). The major resource constraints included lack of technical staff and knowledge on developing websites, knowledge of what can be done with the websites and time to plan website design, or having funds for outsourcing website design. There is assumed lack of technical competence required in developing and/or analyzing web development programs and projects due to the low pay that most NGOs can offer. Related to resource insufficiency of NGOs is the fast turnover of personnel "due to livelihood and career concerns and lack of leader formation mechanisms" (Carino 2002: 290). The telephone interviewees noted high turnover of trained staff as a problem, leaving content development and further enhancement of the website, uploading of useful content undone.

Aside from needing to build staff capacities, the sector also faces a perceived thinning of leadership due to the actual or impending retirement of its first generation leaders (See Carino 2002). More often, the problem is the lack of younger ones to take over, since they may be more attracted to commercialism (higher salaries in the private sector). Building a website and sustaining a program to go online requires a go signal from a senior officer, a program manager, and a technical officer, in consideration of the planning, resources (cost, time and labor), and effort (i.e. content digitization) that need to go with web presence. This means that the more sophisticated and the quantity of features of the website, the more resources (funds and labor) are needed (i.e. to monitor the discussion boards; to digitize resources and library content, to monitor the chatrooms, respond to feedback; post job announcements, monitor pledges and volunteers, among others).

A number of studies highlighted the challenges of using computers and the Internet in the context of community and voluntary work, ranging from resource constraints and poor organizational and human resource capacity (Saidel and Coun 2003; O Donnel and Trench 1999; French and O'Donnell 1997). Likewise, problems faced by Philippine NGOs: lack of human resources, an impending leadership crisis, lack of funding and resource problems are of institution building nature and are compounded by the decline in volunteerism and commitment among NGO members. CSOs like NGOs and POs used to spell volunteerism which helps augment resource problems. When previously, NGO and PO work is primarily driven by public service, now some NGOs are being forced to offer higher salary packages. A significant middle class youth well-versed with computer applications and some level of web development is a welcome opportunity but it seems this is not sufficiently tapped. Technology personnel are commonly attracted by pursuit of higher salaries and greener pastures that NGOs find difficulty in finding skilled volunteers or staff who will accept small salary packages. This makes an imbalance for highly attractive website of those NGOs that are able to attract members that have ICT skills, or are able to pay for such services.

### **Internet as a Space for Deliberation and Discussion?**

An examination of the conversations taking place online would seem to indicate a global scale expansion of critical discourse that constitute what is known as the “public sphere”. However, scholarly discussions center on the public sphere and the Internet seem to focus on access limits, as opposed to adoption or use issues. Which groups actually adopt the Internet for deliberation and what do these civil society organizations use the Internet for? Is it being used as an arena for deliberation? For free flowing of ideas and opinion?

This study's findings runs parallel to previous findings on CSO website use (Stein 2007, Kenix 2007). The online discourse potential of the internet is not presently fulfilling its potential for Philippine NGOs. More than half of all NGOs do not have an online discussion facility. Further, despite the availability of discussion boards for some NGO websites, they are not necessarily used and there is observation that dynamic activity and exchange is present in NGO leaders/members' blogs, as opposed to organizational websites. This shows that participation in deliberative arena is not intrinsic and people will have reasons for not being able to use it for intended purposes. Non-patronization of online dialogue features in websites will have negative implications for NGOs. If discussion boards NGOs have invested funds, labor, and time into are unused, this would lead to discouragement in their use of the same facility or to future investment in such facilities. This also has implications on understanding actual use/value of the Internet as a communication and interactive medium for non-profit organizations operating in developing countries, and on investment choices that they consider.

Further, a critique of NGOs offered by Bebbington, et.al (2008) was the lack of collaboration across NGOs and between NGOs and social movements, and noting the importance for “NGOs to reach out more assertively, open-mindedly, and critically” with social movements. Websites can serve as a facility for representing lateral linkages of NGOs with other CSOs but findings show that websites are not yet tapped fully for representing these partnerships and linkages across CSOs.

## **Power Representations, NGOs and the Internet**

Sparks (1994) surfaced questions about ICTs and power relations in society and argued that the “Information society is often used for the self-legitimation of those who enjoy power in existing societies. This was supported by Calhoun (1998: 381 cited in Ho et al p 146) arguing that “CMC does a little about empowering the poor and the dispersed against the rich, but it does a lot to enhance existing power structures”.

This study has findings that relate to some interesting issues raised by scholars on the interplay of power and ICTs. ICT increasingly mediates how power circulates, is exercised, and what it produces. And as predicted by Castells (1997 cited in Castells 2001: 16) we see the important role being played by the Internet in the new political dynamics, manifested by the growing use of the Internet by civil society organizations, movements, and activists to diffuse information and opinion.

The debate on the Internet’s contribution to the political sphere has brought camps at two far ends: the enthusiasts (Negroponte 1995, Browning 1996 cited in Di Maggio 2001:319) find early evidence of more deliberative political community; while Beniger (1996) and Lessig (1999) predict the reemergence of an unresponsive commercial sphere dominated by the usual players. The higher class composition of groups aiming to speak for the poor has raised inquiries on how such groups can represent them. This may raise some questions on the implications of ICT to civil society organizations. Will going towards ICT mean attracting more paid workers among NGOs? Or hiring middle class who may have knowledge of ICTs, but may not exactly be representative of the poor groups that they represent? Will too much ICT alienate the marginalized/ NGO members that certain groups are trying to represent? For NGOs struggling with very limited funds, will this mean a re-alignment of scarce resources from the delivery of critical services (i.e. healthcare or livelihood training) to ICT or website development? The Philippine case, situated in a developing context where NGOs are perpetually fighting over funding, illuminates this dilemma of allocating resources for ICT.

The views towards the adoption of ICTs and use of ICTs in organizational processes among NGOs and social movements in the Philippines vary. While many have fully embraced the digital revolution, some organizations resist technology dependence and widespread use, with fear of irrelevance to their direct clientele. Many Philippine NGOs have led the fight against capitalism and neocolonialism in Philippine society, and some local activists still see the use of ICTs as product and manifestations of these. Some NGOs question the way ICTs are being used by local and multinational corporations to maintain the economic order and retain their position of dominance in society. This dilemma for some NGOs need to be reconciled as they seek lasting partnerships within the broader local and civil society community.

Viewing Philippine NGOs online would also reflect only a small percentage of Philippine NGOs representing the thousands of NGOs that do not have web access. Given this imbalance in representation in the web and as the internet becomes an important medium for government and the international development community to build collaborations and partnerships, some NGOs may slowly be pushed further aside.

## Conclusion

In general, little evidence was found by this study on the fulfillment of the vast opportunities that the Internet brings for CSOs. The features and activities reviewed determine the value of the Internet for deliberation, discussion, interaction, or mobilizing collective action were found to a very limited degree and true to only a small number of organizations. These findings would indicate that Philippine NGOs, by and large, still have a long way to go in developing the Internet as a deliberative, interconnected tool and an immediate activist space for the users of these websites. However, with Internet penetration of 16% (14M population)<sup>10</sup>, this could mean an indication that NGOs are slowly realizing the value of the Internet and are using it within manageable ways in consideration of resource constraints. While this may not represent the democratic, deliberative public sphere projected by early adopters, it is a step toward that goal. At the very least, online users now have ample access to an essential component of the process for democratization: information advocacy. This implies that some sectors of civil society are now actively using the Internet for advocacy, and government may need to actively catch up to facilitate a balanced discourse.

The website analysis points to a low level of Internet use by a majority of the organizations while the online and telephone interviews that complemented the survey found the high value that Philippine NGOs seem attach to the Internet as a communication resource. This reflects constraints NGOs are facing in the continuing struggle to manage resources and the intent to explore the benefits of ICTs to their organizations, and opportunity for external assistance and support from government and international funding organizations. The dilemmas faced by certain NGOs in terms of coping with technological developments can also be taken into consideration by their partner organizations.

As we go deeper in participation into the information society, it appears that the Internet could be slowly changing concepts and understanding of legitimacy and the need for certification for NGOs. With active online representation, NGOs can alternatively use the Internet to display their goals, be transparent with operations, human resource assets, and financial capacity that can speak out to donors who might likewise want to veer away from bureaucratic dealings with government. This creates a new opportunity for NGOs, in the way digital film makers have immensely multiplied in the Philippines, liberated from the limits of traditional moviemaking by the opportunities posed by ICTs.

But at the same time it can create a dilemma for some members of the NGO community, particularly for the smaller grassroots NGOs. As ICT capacity and professional web presence becomes a gauge for donors and potential members, to identify the capacity and establish the legitimacy of the organizations to support, smaller but well-meaning grassroots NGOs may be overlooked. The development of partnerships and provision of support by government and funding organizations must therefore not be confined within NGOs that have ac-

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<sup>10</sup> Internet World Stats, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#ph>

tive web presence. It also implies an opportunity for government or international organizations in terms of assisting resource-poor NGOs in providing access to ICT resources.

This study has also surfaced a potential conflict faced by NGOs, between having a more "professional" web presence to impress potential donors for fundraising purposes, and emphasizing the more grass-roots interests of their volunteer activists, which is their greatest strength. With NGO volunteerism at a downstream and as NGOs clamor for human and financial resources to increase its capacity, whether in ICT terms or otherwise, they are immersed in a dilemma of being seen as drifting away from their grassroots clientele, and becoming less "non-government" or "non-business". Sometimes, funds spent on technology is seen by other members and NGO stakeholders as money less spent on development programs, thus, the choice of the most appropriate technologies to invest on is important. Active internet use seems currently pertinent to particular (and not all) NGOs and the study found cases of NGOs investing on interactive websites with discussion boards that are not used at all, translating to wastage in resources and reluctance in investing further in ICT resources. It must be recognized (both by NGOs and donor institutions) that certain organizations need to look into other media that are more appropriate to reach their major clientele and stakeholders, and support can be provided to them in terms of identifying and providing technology resources that best match their operations and clientele (i.e. mobile phones, television, radio).

This study benefited from an already existing database of accredited NGOs by the PCNC. Future studies can draw a larger sample, finding a pattern across NGOs of different accreditations or advocacy types. The imbalance in the number of accredited and non-accredited NGOs in this study must be noted as a limitation, and which can be enhanced in future studies. The list of non-accredited NGOs were obtained through random search via *google* and *msn* and mainly to obtain comparative data (vis a vis accredited NGOs). The number of non-accredited NGOs in the sample can be expanded with ample time and resources. It must be noted that the number of non-accredited NGOs could sum up to thousands, and the fact that they are not accredited would mean that there is no "complete" database from which a representative sample could be obtained.

Review can also be extended beyond website features (i.e. analyzing content in depth). A future study could also interview NGO members to better understand why organizations pursue organizational strengthening online (i.e. fundraising or internal experience sharing) and whether the use of websites organizational development had indeed been beneficial. Moreover, how certain NGOs are in a simultaneous conflict between consenting to and resisting technological colonization is interesting an area to explore further. As NGOs become increasingly enmeshed in the information age, their role as critics of the new information economy, and of capitalism, or neo-colonialism is scrutinized.

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## ANNEX A: WEBSITE FUNCTIONALITY INDICATORS

The extent to which the NGO websites represent the activities below were tallied and identified as showing none to very low, low, medium or high, depending on the number of features carried<sup>11</sup>. Features that are available but scarcely used (i.e. discussion board that has less than 2 postings is coded as 1 = “none to low”).

Under *information dissemination*, thirteen features/activities were identified. These are the presence of 1. Vision, Mission, Objectives; 2 Contact Information; 3. Members/Staff / Officials; 4. Program/Project description; 5. Reports; 6. News/ Events information; 7. Organizational history; 8. Speeches, testimonials; 9. Organizational legitimacy (awards, listings, association networks); 10 Other Resources; 11 Search engine; 12. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) facility. Presence of one to three activities were coded as very low; four to six coded as low, seven to 9 as medium and 10-12 features as high (*1-3=Very Low; 4-6=Low; 7-9=Med; 10-12=High*).

On *promoting interaction, discourse and dialogue*, the presence of nine features was searched: 1.) Bulletin boards, forum, guestbook; 2) Registration facility; 3) Mailing list/ listserve; 4) Open Publishing; 5. Polls; 6.) Archiving online discussions; 7.) Interactive weblogs / chatrooms; 8) Sharing of articles/resources by email. NGO websites with none to two features are coded as low, three to five coded as medium, and six to eight as high (*0-2=None to Low; 3-5=Medium; 6-8=High*).

*On delivering online services*, a total of nine features are reviewed. These are the presence of: 1) Consultation; 2) E-Learning; 3) Networking; 4. Library / Reference Search; 5. Web-hosting; 6.) Members' Product Promotion; 7.) Tourism information; 8 Employment advertising for member organizations; 9. Grant Processing. The NGO websites are coded as no online service, one to two corresponded to low/some online service; three to nine were coded as medium to high online service (*0=No online service; 1-2=Some online service; 3-9=Med-High Online service*).

*On carrying out organizational – strengthening activities, the presence of nine activities/features of the NGO websites were reviewed:* 1. Job / internship posting; 2 Internal activity / group solidarity; 3. Posting of membership and volunteer opportunities; 4. Sharing internal work experiences; 5. Linking / networking (listing of partners, communication with partner orgs, and cross posting of activities); 6. Fund raising; 7. Advertising (either by itself, its member's products or accepting advertisers); 8. Links to other external movement / issues; 9. Inquiry/Feedback (*0-3=Low or no organizational activities; 4-6=Medium; 7-9=High*)

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<sup>11</sup> The methodology followed Stein's (2007) on her study of national movements in the U.S. Some of the features identified in Stein's study such as cultural and artistic representation were not included in the study, but was replaced by online service delivery which was deemed more suitable in the context of Philippine NGOs.

NGO websites were reviewed if they facilitated *online mobilization (if they carried online petitions or manifesto, campaigns or action alerts) or group formation*. The NGO websites were coded as having no mobilization and with mobilization.