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How to foster and strengthen civic life through information for action: the role of NGOs

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Abstract:

NGOs have a remarkable role in strengthening democracies in developing countries. One of their roles is usually associated to the custody of civic values and minority rights. In this paper I discuss the particular usage of information by NGOs, a use that is related to political activism. Giving a convincing display to information and spreading it to targeted civil actors, NGOs confer a positive force to data, transforming awareness into social change. The process encompasses the use of information technologies, mostly the Internet. I also offer a description of an Argentinean NGO, "Citizen Power" to exemplify how advocacy organizations generate information. Some issues are raised in the conclusions about NGOs' accountability as well as their contributions to the worldwide flow of information.

1. Fostering awareness through information dissemination

1.1. Differences between NGOs and other information agencies.

In different ways, NGOs have been continuously generating and spreading information as a part of their activities. From their own sources and beyond, these organizations call people for civil responsibility through information awakening. However, there is a wide range of institutions that deal with information creation, storage and dissemination. From journalism to media broadcasting, information generation and diffusion is big business in today's society. Also, libraries, museums and archives have a long history

dealing with information, mostly in charge of the preservation of humankind's cultural and intellectual heritage. Therefore, it seems necessary to start the discussion clearing up the differences between NGOs and other information agencies. Both kinds of institutions have different missions and goals, which becomes apparent in the way they deal with information spread and control. I briefly classify the main differences as follows:

a. Business versus non-profit organization: NGOs are by definition non-profit organizations. Media, conversely, are business companies that make profit by offering publishing and broadcasting services. Therefore, the goal of media is strongly related to business and its logic is commonly intertwined to information that may be of interest for the masses or may cause an impact, or even information that may be "sold".

Conversely, NGOs are supported by their particular donors, members, volunteers, or grants from transnational organization (such as international foundations, The World Bank or The United Nations). Even when in some cases they offer services for payment as a way of sustaining, their goal is not the profit itself. Media organizations not only support their activities with resources generated by their own sales, but also seek for profit beyond sustainability.

b. Information for awareness versus information for action: this is perhaps the widest distinctive characteristic. While mass media companies may (or may not) seek to promote citizens' awareness by publishing their news, the goal of NGOs whose main aim is advocacy, is to foster action among citizens. The main asset of these "advocacy NGOs" is the creation and dissemination of information to encourage citizens to take actions to change society.

c. Information for updating versus information for advocacy: the journalism and broadcast media deal with information mainly to keep people updated about news. Even with party-political or ideological points of view underlying their editorial policies, media claim to be universal, neutral and objective. The dissemination of information or news focuses on people in general rather than sectors of society in particular (such as minorities or politicians).

NGOs have a clear assumed position regarding issues that affect citizens, such as government transparency, minority rights or the environment. Their audience is the sector of society involved in the issue or idea, or with a particular role in decision-making of the problem.

d. Library, museum and archives versus NGOs: libraries, museums and archives have a fundamental role in strengthening democracy. The mission is strongly related to the storage and preservation of information, not in its diffusion. Their role is quite different from NGOs as they do not generate information; rather, they gather, store, manage and provide users with access to the data, information and knowledge that is already available.

Further on, I now discuss the activities of Argentinean NGO *Citizen Power (Poder Ciudadano)*, where the particular point of view of advocacy by NGOs is illustrated.

2. NGOs and the strengthening of democracy in Argentina.

2.1. Brief overview about the NGO sector in Argentina.

Traditionally in Argentina the state as institution took a wide range of public sector needs under its responsibility and offered services aimed to satisfy them. Education, health and social security were run by the government through different administrative offices such as departments and secretariats. Hospitals were primary public and state supported. Education, from K-12 to universities and research agencies, was also public supported and

free. The third sector did contribute to sustain social needs, but more related to advocacy, cultural development and public policy control (Campetella & González Bombal, 2000).

Since 1983, the consolidation of democracy arrived at the same time as a crisis in state support to those social services, which most authors largely attributes to the strength of liberal economic policies (Campetella & Gonzalez Bombal, 2000b; Kohen, 1998). As a consequence, the state withdrew its responsibility from the public realm, leaving grassroots organizations, NGOs and the third sector itself in charge of meeting social needs. The private sector was also compelled to take care of social programs under the "companies' social responsibility" claim (Campetella & Gonzalez Bombal, 2000b).

Beyond this contemporary role, Argentina's third sector has a long history related to civil life and the public realm in a terrain totally apart from social service. This history is related to the defense of democracy. As Smulovitz (1996) points out, taking shape in a region where corruption and authoritarianism disrupted democracy very often, Latin American NGOs "have concentrated on the creation of social trust and on the improvement of accountability and representation mechanisms" (1996, I, ¶ 19). Even when the adoption of liberalism as the state economic policy gave an outstanding role in strengthening NGOs for social service, the development of these organizations in Latin America (and therefore, in Argentina) is more related to political activism rather than meeting basic social needs. During the dictatorship (1976-1983) and before, civil organizations in Argentina were mainly involved in the fight for civil rights, workforce claims such as wages and labor hours and so on (Campetella & Gonzalez Bombal, 2000b).

During the 1990s, social services became an activity that Argentinean NGOs were compelled to accomplish due to state economic policy, i.e., the adoption of liberalism. But it is not the mission of NGOs to be in charge of such services. Furthermore, NGOs might not accomplish them correctly because they represent the interest of different sectors within society, rather than the general perspective. Considering that only an institution responsible for issues throughout society can meet all the needs of civil society, NGOs should be excluded from social service as a mission since they concentrate their forces in a particular sector or aspect of social life. The state is the institution that holds responsibility for meeting social needs. Therefore, "in so far as constitutional and republican institutions are characterized by their universality and by their non voluntary character, and since NGOs do not have the legitimate monopoly of the use of force, then it follows that they are structurally unable to fulfill the task [of meeting social needs]" (Smulovitz, 1996, I, ¶ 22).

In consequence, even though NGOs currently take on an important role in social assistance, their very mission and tradition of services in Argentina have not been related to such assistance. Below I discuss the case of *Citizen Power* as an example that follows the tradition of NGOs defending democracy in Argentina and the region.

2.2. Information production according to types of NGOs in Argentina

Although every NGOs produces and spreads information in some way, they could be classified regarding to what extent both activities are important to meet the organization's goals. Smulovitz (2004) distinguishes between two types of non-governmental organizations according to their role in information creation and dissemination. First, there are *service organizations*, whose main goal is to solve social problems. Organizations such as homes for battered women or abused children target people's basic needs and provide them with

elements to satisfy that need (i.e., food, protection against domestic violence, etc.), or develop skills to do so, such as legal advice. Service organizations only generate information as a side effect of their activities, and mostly in an unsystematized way since their main goal is to provide services for meeting urgent social needs.

Second, there are *advocacy organizations*, committed to strength democracy through citizens' awareness and participation into the public realm. NGOs that fight for minorities' rights, survey environmental issues, follow-up state activities and programs fall onto this category. For these organizations, information constitutes a key factor in pursuing their goals. They generate and spread data related to controversial issues, seeking for peoples' understanding and support to their ideals.

The information that advocacy NGOs generate depends upon the kind of problem they aim to solve. Specifically, Smulovitz exemplifies with the *Asociacion de Victimas de Accidentes de Transito*, AVAT (*Association of Traffic Casualties*). They process and disseminate information taken from external sources and also produce information from their own ones. Regarding outside sources, they gather data mainly from official agencies (for example, the reports on causalities for traffic accidents by the *Dirección de Política Criminal* (*Department of Criminal Policy*) and the media (such as newspaper articles). Additionally, AVAT produces information from two main sources: (i) the association's directory of follow-up cases (gathered from their members and associated), and (ii) reports on public policy applied to traffic casualty issues. To accomplish the goal of advocacy, AVAT compiles data showing for example, that traffic casualty rate in Argentina is one of the highest worldwide. Here, the main goal is to raise the issue of to what extent public policy is effective in lowering the casualty rate. "[The Association of Traffic Casualties uses] the information available and their own sources in such a way that fosters public awareness about the issue" (Smulovitz, 2004, audio recording). In fact, the selected information was already available from several sources, such as the above mentioned Department of Criminal Policy or insurance companies' reports and statistical data. AVAT's key contribution as an NGO concerned with traffic problems is to process and display information highlighting the lack of a public policy to solve the problem and in consequence, the necessity for one (Smulovitz, 2004). Information display and dissemination raises citizens' awareness of an everyday topic in urban life such as traffic accidents and their consequences. The NGO aspiration is to put pressure on state agencies and legislative power to change public policy regarding the topic. Consequently, AVAT's contribution to the issue is twofold—first, they create and disseminate information for civil awareness; second, they *prove the case*, i.e. they demonstrate that traffic accident casualties might be considered as murder cases in some instances (Smulovitz, 2004).

Smulovitz also brings the NGOs called CELS and CORREPI as examples of information process and display of information for awareness. Particularly, CORREPI (which stands for *Coordinate against Police and Institutional Repression*) files reports on victims of police violence and periodically publishes the number of cases of police violence it compiles. Therefore, CORREPI "denounces the existence of this problem; they prove that it is a real problem by showing the data they collect themselves, such as number or type of murders produced in any month" (Smulovitz, 2004, sound recording). CELS does similar work regarding human rights in general in Argentina.

Given the classification of NGOs according to the role information plays within their mission, I now concentrate on the case of *Citizen Power* to exemplify my exposition.

2. 3. *The case of Citizen Power: transforming information into action.*

Within Argentinean advocacy organizations, I chose to focus on Citizen Power because this institution goes further in the use of information as it transforms awareness into action. Citizen Power also follows the long tradition of defending democracy in Argentina, which I already discussed. This section of the paper is the result of an interview with Sandra Cesario, coordinator of the *Area de Participacion Ciudadana y Recursos Humanos (Human Rights and Citizens' Participation Department)*.

Cesario describes Citizen Power as "a non party organization which shows citizens how they can affect public policy" (Cesario, 2004, sound recording). Citizen Power's efforts concentrate on raising citizens' awareness of their rights. According to Cesario, Citizen Power is an organization that creates and disseminates information to raise awareness and foster action rather than produce academic research. Several programs within the organization witness this purpose—I will mention a few of them as examples of how an NGO can transform information into action

The House of Representatives Monitoring Program. This program audits senators and representatives performance during the course of their duties. The program follows up legislators' performance within parliamentary commissions in issues such as: number of times they do not show up to their duties, behavior during the commission meeting (for example, paying attention versus speaking on their cell phones), their level of commitment to the law under discussion, whether or not the law project is thoroughly discussed or its treatment is boycotted, and so on. The monitors are civil volunteers trained by the Politics Department within Citizen Power. Volunteers gather data from monitoring activities and then submit a report (Cesario, 2004)

Through this "watchdog" program Citizen Power not only evaluates legislators' performance, but also whether the acts approved in sessions were consciously voted by legislators or not, and to what extent they were voted because of political alliances. Additionally, and because volunteers are responsible for monitoring reports, they become educated as citizens to follow up legislators' activities and behavior. In this twofold way, Citizen Power promotes civil awareness and action through the creation and dissemination of information.

"InfoCivica" Program. Citizen Power also hosts a web site dedicated to information dissemination, called *InfoCivica* (<http://www.infocivica.org/>). The program's mission is "to facilitate direct access to information generated by NGOs to the mass media" (web site, <http://www.infocivica.org/mision.asp>). The site publishes updated information processed by journalists working within Citizen Power and about NGOs actions and achievements. The main contribution of InfoCivica is to generate news about the third sector activities, issues and accomplishments, becoming a forum for the sector.

Candidates' Database Program. This program gathers information about the legal and financial profile of candidates to public positions in elections. A personal record is offered from each candidate, including properties (owned by the candidate and his/her relatives), annual income, membership organizations, legal situation, etc. There is also information about the campaign's source of funds. When the candidate refuses to publish the information, the record shows it by leaving the corresponding data field empty (Cesario, 2004; Poder Ciudadano, 2003).

Through these three programs Citizen Power not only promotes awareness but also make citizens take action for democratizing society. Volunteers get trained to follow up public officers' performance along with gathering and spreading data that increases civil participation. Clearly, the utilization of information by this NGO may be distinguished from those fostered by traditional information agencies such as libraries, museums and archives. The NGOs information collects and spreads data without seeking profit (as opposed to mass media). Its only mission is to advocate and promote citizen action.

3. *New forms of advocacy*

I will now discuss new ways of advocacy offered by the advance of telecommunication technologies. I will leave the case of Argentina and speak in global terms since those technologies provide NGOs with the opportunity for worldwide movements.

Ribeiro (1998) discusses how technology has changed the way in which NGOs recreate information forums to spread their ideas. The Internet now plays a fundamental role in fostering civil participation through the so-called *cyberactivism*, i.e. political militancy practiced by members of the virtual community supported by telecommunication technologies, such as the Internet.

3.1. *Transnationalism and globalization*

Within the current worldwide scenario, globalization has proved to be the imposed economic paradigm. Globalization conveys a political system according to its characteristics, called *transnationalism* by Ribeiro. Transnationalism, the counterpart of globalization in politics and ideology, encompasses "the organization of people within imagined communities; their relationship to power institutions; and the reformulation of identities, subjectivities, and the relationship between the private and public spheres." (Ribeiro, 1998, p. 326). The spread of the Internet as a means of communication imposes *imagined communities*, i.e. communities geographically spread out but joined by the common interest of their members through the virtual space of the net. Those community members join to be stronger and protest, condemn, strike for their rights, raise issues and so on. They are aware, politically active and forcefully promote their ideas—they are *cyberactivists*. Cyberactivism is the political militant behavior corresponding to transnationalism (Ribeiro, 1998).

Through this new space of communication and interaction, NGOs find a powerful media to promote ideas and commit people to activities. Not only do they publicize information but they also take positive action through virtual activism or cyberactivism. Common ways of using the Internet for such a purpose is to spread a poll, a survey, raise funds through e-donation, and so on. The key point of cyberactivism is to take advantage of information technologies far from communication or dissemination. For cyberactivism, information technology is a means of action. The Internet becomes a scenario of voting and protesting along with communicating through virtual conferences, chatting and posting news. The media becomes the very arena of achieving action.

An example of cyberactivism is the Web site of *The Association for Progressive Communications*, APC (www.apc.org). As its Web site explains, APC "is an international network of civil society organizations dedicated to empowering and supporting groups and individuals working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), including

the Internet." (APC Web site, 2004, About APC, ¶ 1). Although APC defines the extension as an "international network," it can be taken as the geographical (i.e. spatial) field of transnationalism. In fact, the organization does not proclaim a joint venture among nations (which could have been rightly called *inter-national*), but the cooperation among NGOs acting on common issues and disregarding national ownerships. Moreover, through the site geographical locations are related to regional issues only—not membership. For example, the sub-site "Internet policy monitors" displays three sections corresponding to three regions: Africa, Europe and Latin America. In each sub-site, articles related to issues within the region are posted and announcements are published. Information is exposed and classified geographically according to regional activities, not to the national membership of the network members.

APC also holds a sub-site titled "Capacity building", which is devoted to training civilians and organizations to take full advantage of information technology tools. The sub-site publishes training material as well as direction for the strategic use of Internet and, in general, for managing NGOs.

Specifically related to training for Internet managing and application, APC "Capacity building" sub-site also offers a link to the Web site *ItrainOnline* (<http://www.itrainonline.org/>). ItrainOnline is a joint venture of The Association for Progressive Communications (APC), Bellanet International Secretariat, The International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), The International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), Oneworld Network, and UNESCO. The project aims to cover the needs of civil society organizations for training in both information technologies skills and content evaluation (ItrainOnline Web site, 2004, About ItrainOnline, Objectives and target users). The site has a wealth of free resources for online self-training such as Web development classes, techniques for posting multimedia online (audio, video, radio and TV) and sites for technical support. It includes a sub-site dedicated to resources for information technology trainees.

3.2. *Issues related to cyberactivism: the digital divide*

The "digital divide" is a problem for cyberactivism when trying to spread information to all of its intended audience. The term refers to "the problem of information inequality in the use of digital technology on computer-mediated communication (CMC)" (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003, p.316). However, the problem of access to CMC is far more complex. As the authors discuss, the digital divide encompasses four kinds of barriers: lack of elementary digital experience (or *mental access*), no computers and network connections (or *material access*), lack of digital skills (*skill access*), and lack of significant usage opportunities (*usage access*) (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003). Despite the fact that the problem is complicated, the debate mainly focuses on the problem of having a computer and a network connection. Applied to the NGOs' information dissemination goal, the conclusion is that supplying developing countries with IT devices will narrow the digital divide. Following this reasoning, NGOs should concentrate efforts in helping those countries to obtain funds to acquire technology. Once everything is *set-up*, more people will access public information and will become aware of social problems.

But the digital divide issue seems far more challenging. Robert Hunter Wade (2002) highlights that "efforts to bridge the digital divide may have the effect of locking developing countries into a new form of dependency on the West (...) As the developing countries

participate in ICTs [Information and Communication Technologies], they become more vulnerable to the increasing complexity of the hardware and software and to the quasi-monopolistic power of providers of key ICT services" (2002, p.443). Especially since NGOs are mostly supported by external agencies and, they often have to accommodate their plans and objectives to donors' interests.

4. Conclusions

A particular note is highlighted by critics of the NGOs' role in strengthening democracy in developing countries. The observation is referred to the accountability of these organization in front of the people they say they serve, i.e., the beneficiaries of their policies. Mercer (2002) points out that NGOs are losing the key role in supporting grassroots organizations because of donors' conditions for funding. Most donors draw sophisticated technical conditions for formulating project for funds. Urban-based educated elites are the ones with the required skills, i.e. "professionals or civil servants with access to information and contacts only available in capital cities where donor organizations and foreign embassies congregate." (Mercer, 2002, p. 15. Also Joseph, 2000). However, this elite is not usually culturally involved with the poorest sector, mainly located in rural areas. As a consequence, these relegated sectors, who are supposed to be the actual end-beneficiaries of NGOs' mission and activities, are not truly represented. "The irony here then, is that as donors attempt to 'scale-up' the impact of their work, to handle more (foreign) funding and take on greater roles in service provision, they are simultaneously forcing NGOs to loosen their connections with their grassroots constituencies. Strengthening NGOs may actually serve to weaken civil society" (Tvedt referenced by Mercer, 2002, p.16).

The above mentioned digital divide issue makes this trade off particularly apparent. Since the implementation of technology is overestimated in solving the divide problem, NGOs concentrate their requests on asking donors for funds to improve technology. These donors have their own agendas related to the dissemination of technology as business (Wade, 2002). Moreover, as Sangeeta Kamat (2003) adds "[NGOs'] dependence on external funding and compliance with funding agency targets raise doubts about whether their accountability lies with the people or with funding agencies." (p. 66).

Beyond the issue of the legitimacy of NGOs' representation of society, their contribution to information creation and dissemination is remarkable and quite original. Information for advocacy is not just a passive diffusion of information, but also stimulates positive action. To reach this goal, advocacy organizations take advantage of techniques such as designing an effective visual display or putting together data to prove the case (i.e. that there is a need for the issue to be solved).

In developing countries such as Argentina, NGOs that specialize in advocacy are crucial in helping to spread information so that civilians stand up for their rights. NGOs foster activism and accountability within society, and we should recognize this outstanding contribution in the defense of democracy.

LINKS:

“CORREPI”: <http://www.correpi.lahaine.org/>

in English: <http://www.derechos.org/correpi/eng.html>

“Derechos Human Rights”: <http://www.derechos.org/>,

And its sister partner "Equipo Nikzor"<http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/eng.html>

“Poder Ciudadano”: <http://www.poderciudadano.org/index.asp>

“The Association for Progressive Communications, APC”: www.apc.org

“ItrainOnline”: www.itrainonline.org

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