Online Opportunities for Civic Engagement? An Examination of Australian Third Sector Organisations on the Internet

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Abstract

This article reports on a preliminary analysis of Australian third sector, or non-profit, organisations’ attempts to mobilise citizen engagement using online technologies. Recent debates about the nature and importance of citizen engagement, and the impacts of online technologies on citizen engagement, are reviewed in order to identify the significance of these technologies to third sector organisations. Drawing on a content analysis of 50 Australian third sector organisations’ websites, I then consider the ways in which these organisations are, or are not, utilising online technological capacity to mobilise citizen engagement with their organisational activities. The research concludes that, while the organisations reviewed are utilising the capacity of online technologies to present information about their offline activities, they are less consistent in using these technologies to mobilise civic engagement in new ways. The implications of the research findings are discussed in relation to the future of the Australian third sector and public policy.

Keywords: third sector; civic engagement; online activism
Introduction

In a period of global social, cultural, economic and political transformations, the importance of engaged citizens and robust civil society is gaining increased attention in many countries. Amongst other factors, rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICT) is providing both new imperatives for, and new conditions in which, individuals and organisations participate in the public sphere. Although they are not constitutive of civil society in its entirety, third sector, or non-profit, cooperative and mutual organisations have traditionally played a significant role in mediating civic engagement in Australian life (see Lyons 2001). The Australian third sector comprises around 700,000 organisations which, in June 2000, employed over 600,000 people, and mobilised the equivalent in volunteer hours of an additional 285,000 full-time employees (Lyons 2001).

The burgeoning interest in the importance of social capital as the ‘glue’ that holds society together, popularly spearheaded by US political scientist Robert Putnam (see Putnam 2000), has raised concerns about declining participation in third sector organisations, suggesting that such decline is reflective of a reduction in levels of civic engagement. Civic engagement may be briefly defined as individual and collective forms of action that are designed to identify and address matters of public concern. While civic engagement includes participation in formal and informal political processes, this article is particularly concerned with the latter. That is, it focuses on those aspects of civic engagement that are mediated through civil society, rather than through formal political institutions or processes. More specifically, it is concerned with civic engagement facilitated by third sector organisations.

In the context of broader discussions about whether social capital is in decline, a growing theoretical debate has emerged about the effects of ICT – particularly online technologies – on civic engagement. This debate is essentially polarised between those who hail online technologies as facilitating radical social spaces in which virtual solidarity and activism are produced and those who bemoan online activities as indicative of the rise of consumerism over citizenship, the fragmentation of social relations and the consequent erosion of social capital (Barraket 2002, p. 14). The empirical research to support either position in this debate remains limited, although work such as that conducted in the US by Horrigan (2001) as part of the Pew Internet and American Life Project suggests that some people are using online technologies to engage in new forms of collective activity, and to access more traditional forms of civic activity in new ways. The broad debate about the impact of ICT on civil society and civic engagement will be explored in detail below.

While the value of an actively engaged citizenry is receiving renewed attention in public policy discourses, and the impacts of ICT on civic engagement is the subject of robust theoretical discussion, very limited attention has to date been given to just how online technologies may impact upon third sector organisations’ capacities to mobilise civic engagement. That is, while some writers are lamenting the decline in traditional forms of association, limited attention has been directed to just how online technologies may be used to enhance the capacity of third sector organisations to engage people’s support for and participation in their activities. At the same time, those who are researching the engagement possibilities of online technologies (see Wellman et al 1996; Wellman et al 2001; Kavanaugh & Patterson 2001) are typically more concerned with new forms of connectivity and collective action than they are with how traditional third sector organisations may organise themselves online. There are two exceptions to this gap in knowledge. The first is a small body of empirical research – often commissioned by government – on ICT use in community service organisations (see, for example Pargmegiani & Sachdeva 2000; Hall Aitken 2001). This
research identifies some very important issues around ICT capacity, and related policy implications, in organisations that serve traditionally vulnerable groups, is primarily concerned with issues of service delivery, and does not focus on issues of civic engagement as such. The other exception is an emerging non-profit management literature on ePhilanthropy (see, for example Hart 2002; Olsen et al 2001), which seeks to promote the advantages of online technologies for donor relationship building. While this literature has some utility in explaining the possibilities of ICT for third sector organisations, it is limited to the most instrumental aspect of civic engagement; that is, making financial contributions.

The purpose of this article is to consider existing theoretical and empirical understandings of the civic engagement impacts of ICT, and to present a preliminary analysis of Australian third sector organisations’ attempts to mobilise civic engagement using these technologies. Specifically, the focus of this article, and the research on which it is based, is on the way in which third sector organisations utilise their web presence to create opportunities for individual and collective engagement. I begin by considering recent debates about the nature and importance of civic engagement, and the impacts of ICT – particularly online technologies – on civic engagement, in order to identify the significance of these technologies to third sector organisations. On the basis of a systematic analysis of 50 Australian third sector organisations’ websites, I then consider the ways in which these organisations are, or are not, utilising online technological capacity to mobilise civic engagement in their organisational activities. The findings of this analysis are then discussed in relation to the future of the Australian third sector.

Civic Engagement in the Network Era

Manuel Castells has declared the network to be the principal organising framework of the information age. In so doing, he suggests that ‘the Internet is the technological basis for the organisational form of the Information Age’ (Castells 2001, p.1). In terms of the public sphere, the notion of networks may be seen as informing the way in which policy is produced and implemented and the way in which local social systems are organising themselves. In brief, some policy theorists argue that contemporary liberal democracies are shifting away from bureaucratic forms of government and towards networked approaches to governance in order to manage increasingly complex societal needs (Considine 2001). One of the key implications of the shift towards governance is an increasing role for non-government actors (including business and third sector organisations and individual citizens) in the design and delivery of public policy. As Considine describes it, network governance expresses an alternative to markets and hierarchies, and ‘imagines a set of public and private agencies taking over the joint delivery of public services’ (2001, p.15). The importance of civil society and civic engagement to the healthy functioning of society is currently being revisited by political leaders, theorists and practitioners. In the Australian context, we have seen growing discussions by government and opposition leaders on the importance of voluntarism and local development. Initiatives such as the Prime Minister’s Community Business Partnership awards suggest an increased emphasis on communities ‘doing for themselves’ in collaboration with a more socially responsible corporate Australia. At state and local government level, there has been a veritable explosion of policy and programme approaches that focus on community capacity building, civic engagement, integrated service delivery and local solutions to so-called local problems. In effect, civil society in general and the third sector specifically, are being simultaneously interpellated as an important player in the reform of public service delivery and a site for renewal of social democracy.
The notion of civil society has itself been the subject of broad theoretical debate across the sociological and political sciences. While some theorists view civil society as an emergent public sphere, in which the principles of citizenship, rights, democratic participation and the ‘rule of law’ are grounded (see Habermas 1989), others describe it as the space between the formalised structures of the state and informal relations of family (see Walzer 1995). In the latter definition, the market is included as an integral feature of civil society. Edwards has recently summarised theoretical understandings of civil society into three broad definitional categories: a focus on civil society as a part of society, which is constituted in associational life; civil society as an ideal kind of society; and civil society as the public sphere (Edwards 2004, p.10). Given this article’s particular focus on civic participation through third sector organisations, it is specifically concerned with the first of these definitional categories. While the third sector itself does not constitute civil society, it provides the organisational framework through which much formal and informal associational activity takes place. These forms of associational activity, in turn, are representative of civic engagement; that is, they involve individual and collective actions that give expression to diverse human aspirations, and/or which seek to influence rules, laws and public policy.

In a recent study of civic engagement in Britain, Pattie and Seyd (2003) identified three ‘types’ of civic engagement. The first category they describe is ‘individualistic activism’, which is characterised by relatively individual acts, such as making donations, signing petitions, and ethical consumption. The second dimension is ‘contact activism’, which includes making contact with organisations, and writing to the media and/or political leaders. The third type of engagement is ‘collective activism’, which includes participation in meetings and collective actions (including civil disobedience) and ‘the propensity to form a group of like-minded people’ (Pattie & Seyd 2003, p.448). While Pattie and Seyd’s study is more concerned with civic interaction with formal political institutions and practices, and is not specifically concerned with online activity, their typology of civic engagement provides a useful framework through which to explore online civic engagement via third sector organisations. This will be discussed further in the methodology section below.

Civic Engagement and Online Technologies: A review of the theoretical debate and empirical evidence

There is a wealth of theoretical literature that considers the potential of online technologies, and particularly the Internet, in building civil society and online democracy (see, for example Wellman et al 1996; Street 1997; Levine 2000; Naughton 2001). As discussed in the introduction to this article, the debate is heavily polarised. This polarisation is illustrated by the opposing perspectives of Levine (2000) and Naughton (2001).

Levine (2000) has suggested that ‘online civil society’ poses significant concerns in five areas:

1. Access, and contribution, to online content is highly inequitable, which reduces the possibilities of genuinely democratic participation;

2. Online interaction replaces robust social bonds with superficial and contingent ones and, over time, use of the Internet is socially disengaging or atomising society as a whole;

3. Online interaction threatens public deliberation, as there is limited engagement across ideological divides, and exit from online debate prevails over exercising dissent or working through difference;
4. The Internet has dramatically increased consumer choice, which has encouraged the rise of consumerism over personal creativity; and

5. The Internet has fundamentally changed the nature and limitations of privacy, which can constrain people’s motivation to associate.

At the other end of the spectrum, Naughton (2001) argues that, while the Internet is a contested space, where corporate power and government regulation are limiting the freedoms of online engagement, the benefits of the Internet to civil society are that it:

1. Facilitates radical access to published data, information and knowledge;
2. Lowers the barriers to publication and enables groups and individuals to bypass traditional cultural gatekeepers in the expression of ideas, issues, and causes;
3. Facilitates rapid communication on a global scale;
4. Facilitates the sharing of information resources; and
5. Facilitates the formation and maintenance of virtual communities of people or institutions with shared interests.

It is axiomatic that the advancement of online networking technologies has radicalised opportunities for individual and organisational networking across the globe. What remains unclear, however, is the quality of these networks and the outcomes they produce. As suggested by the polarisation of the theoretical literature on this topic, the nature and extent of the impacts of online networking opportunities on civil society in general, or civic engagement in particular, are not yet well understood. The arguments cited above, however, suggest that the rise of online activity offers both new possibilities and pitfalls for third sector involvement in building robust civil society.

The theoretical debate encompasses two ‘sub-debates’ about ICT and civil society. The first of these is the extent to which ICT is transforming collective action through global online networking and advocacy (see, for example, Keck & Sikkink 1998). Led for the most part by theorists of social movements and non-institutional politics, this body of literature has identified ICT as a critical factor in the emergence of ‘segmented, polycentric, ideologically integrated networks’ or ‘SPINs’ (Levine 2000, p.4), such as support networks for the Zapatista uprising in Mexico and the anti-globalisation movement which has recently stimulated mass protest actions throughout the world. SPINs are mobilised online and, writers suggest, provide new opportunities for global solidarity around economic, social, and environmental causes.

To date, there has been limited discussion within this particular debate about the impacts of online collective action on traditional social movement and advocacy organisations. Keck and Sikkink (1998) have suggested that the information society has redefined the nature of social movement activity. They identify the emergence of ICT enabled ‘transnational advocacy networks’, which are not social movement organisations, per se, but fluid representations of ideas rather than traditionally organised constituencies (Keck & Sikkink 1998, p.236).

As a number of writers have pointed out, however, online advocacy and civic engagement is limited by inequitable access of individuals and organisations to ICT, and by the limited availability and accessibility of meaningful content online (Kirschenbaum and Kunamneni 2001; Levine 2000). The implication for the third sector is that, while it does not engage systematically and creatively with the opportunities for information dissemination, relationship building, and advocacy afforded by online technologies, its power over content and use of ICT to stimulate civic engagement will remain minimal.
The second ‘sub-debate’ on ICT and citizen participation and engagement is concerned with the extent to which online activity supports or erodes offline, local community building activity. This debate has engaged a range of theorists and practitioners – particularly those concerned with how social capital is generated and mobilised – and mirrors the general polarisation of opinion about ICT and civil society discussed above. Critics of the effects of ICT on community life (see, in particular, Turkle 1996; Putnam 2000) have argued that ICT has fostered a decline in social capital by replacing face to face interaction with poorer quality ‘virtual’ interaction, and by taking time away from civic activity. Conversely, proponents of the impacts of ICT on social capital (see, for example, Rheingold, 1993; Wellman et al, 1996) have argued that online technologies create new opportunities for the development of networks and interaction, and that these relationships also foster greater offline interaction and participation. One implication of this scenario is that the decline of social capital as measured by leading theorists such as Putnam (1993, 2000) focuses on traditional forms of civic involvement (such as organisational involvement) and fails to capture emerging forms of participation and engagement developing in cyberspace.

Wellman et al (2001) have suggested that use of ICT – particularly the Internet – neither increases nor decreases social capital, but rather that it serves a supplementary function. As outlined by Wellman et al, the supplement argument does not privilege the Internet as a profound shaper of social trends, but ‘presents the Internet as best understood in the context of a person’s overall life’ (2001, p.440). In this sense, for regular users of online technologies, the Internet is not a distinct or ‘disembodied’ social space, but one of a number of settings in which interpersonal and collective interaction potentially occur.

While the theoretical debate on the impacts of online technologies on civic engagement and collective life has received fairly extensive attention from social sciences, there have, to date, been relatively few studies which have attempted to investigate this issue empirically. The following briefly summarises those, primarily North American studies, which have begun to interrogate the relationship between online technology use and civic engagement.

Based on national survey data collected in the United States in 1995, 1996, 1997, and 2000, Katz and Rice found that internet users were more likely than non-users to participate in traditional forms of civic engagement and that ‘the Internet provided a platform for a significant amount of additional forms of political activity’ (2003, p.135). Further, this study found that, in both 1995 and 2000, regular internet users were significantly more likely to belong to at least one community organisation than non users (Katz & Rice 2003, p.130).

In a survey of 1,697 Internet users for the Pew Internet & American Life project, Horrigan (2001) found that the Internet is a site of meaningful engagement, and that many people were using the Internet to intensify their connection to their local communities and community organisations. This research found that 29% of participants used online technologies to contact local community organisations, ranking contact with these types of organisations 4th out of twelve types of organisations contacted. Of the people who contacted local community groups online, 80% were members or supporters of these organisations prior to contacting them online. However, the research found that Internet use is drawing new and different kinds of people to local groups and that, once they make contact online, they tend to maintain a high level of involvement (Horrigan 2001, p.5). As with other studies, this research found a correlation between Internet experience and joining local groups online. That is, familiarity with online technology appears to be a pre-condition for meaningful online participation.

With regard to local democratic engagement, Horrigan (2001) found that the Internet was playing a less significant role. The research concluded that, at the local level, people utilise
the Internet primarily as a source of information about local commerce and community activities, and that involvement in online deliberation (including communicating with elected officials and debating local issues) was low. Limited public access to the Internet was identified as one barrier to online civic engagement. It should be noted that the research only surveyed existing Internet users, thereby excluding those with no access to Internet use. As such, the extent of the problem of inequitable access and participation was not made clear in this study.

In a longitudinal study of the impact of a community computer network on social capital and community involvement in Blacksburg, Virginia, Kavanaugh and Patterson (2001) identified frequent and increasing use of the network and Internet for social capital building activities in the local community. These activities included increased use of the Internet to communicate with local family members, church members, informal social groups and local community organisations. However, the research also found that there was no correlation between computer network/Internet use and increased community involvement and attachment, except for a subset of users who were already actively involved in the community (Kavanaugh & Patterson 2001).

In a web-based survey of 39,211 visitors to the National Geographic Society website, Wellman et al (2001) found that the communication possibilities of the Internet supplemented participants’ use of face to face and telephone interaction, without increasing or decreasing this interaction. However, they found that there was a correlation between heavy Internet use and increased involvement in voluntary organisations and political activity. It should be noted that, while Wellman et al draw the conclusion that ‘the Internet supplements and increases organisational involvement’ (2001, p.444), their methodology and analysis does not appear to support this causality. That is, while the research identifies an association between these two factors, it is not clear whether it determines that high organisational involvement is a pre-condition of heavy Internet use, or that heavy Internet use determines organisational involvement. However, a longitudinal study of the impact of the Internet on civic engagement conducted in the US by Jennings and Zeitner (2003) found that Internet access and use itself had a significant positive affect on several indicators of civic engagement.

Four of the five studies are consistent in their findings that the longer people are users of online technologies, the more likely they are to use these technologies for the purposes of social capital building and civic engagement. However, the Kavanaugh and Patterson (2001) research contradicts the Pew Internet and American Life project finding that people are broadly using the Internet to enhance their local community participation, while the Wellman et al (2001) research is inconclusive on this matter. As observed by Kavanaugh and Patterson (2001), there is a basic ‘chicken and egg’ problem in assuming a causal relationship between ICT use and social capital levels. That is, do high levels of social capital determine robust online community networks, or vice versa? (Kavanaugh and Patterson, 2001, p.506). Building on this question, should we assume a relationship at all? And, if so, are such relationships likely to be linear (causal) or iterative (cyclical)? While some inferences may be drawn from the research summarised here, it is clear that rigorous comparative longitudinal research is required if these questions are to be validly investigated.

While the relationship between online technology use and civic engagement is not fully understood, research conducted by Horrigan (2001) and Jennings & Zeitner (2003) presents evidence to suggest that online technologies are being used to facilitate civic engagement amongst some groups. The work of Horrigan and the Pew Internet and American Life project more generally also suggests that online interactivity is supporting new forms of civic engagement, both within and outside the parameters of existing political institutions and third
sector organisations. Horrigan’s research also suggests that, via online technologies, people who would otherwise not engage with particular third sector organisations are doing so.

Despite a robust international debate about the impacts of ICT on civic engagement, there has been a relative dearth of empirical research conducted in Australia, with regard to the impacts of ICT on mobilising civic engagement in general terms, or online engagement through third sector organisations specifically. Simpson et al (2001) and Henman and Dean (2004) have examined the implications of ICT capacity for third sector organisations engaged in particular contractual or partnership arrangements with government. However, the emphasis here has been on the service delivery functions of a specific set of third sector organisations, rather than on civic engagement as such. While the international literature illuminates a broad set of questions to be investigated, it does little to explicate the Australian experience. Similar patterns in household and organisational take-up of online technologies in Australia and the United States suggest that Horrigan (2001) and Jennings and Zeitner’s (2003) findings that online technologies are influencing the nature of civic engagement may have some resonance here. However, given the differences in socio-cultural, political, and technological environments of these research settings, as well as the different historical roles and dimensions of these countries’ third sectors, it is clear that empirically informed understandings of the Australian experience need to be established.

The changing role of civil society in governance and policy, combined with the transformative effects of online technologies on organisational practice and individual activity, suggests that Australian third sector organisations are facing both a new operating environment and changing opportunities for mobilising civic engagement to meet social, economic, environmental and cultural needs. In this context, third sector use of online technologies is increasingly significant. The empirical findings discussed below represent an exploratory effort to further understand these opportunities in the Australian context.

Methodology

A preliminary analysis of the home pages of 50 Australian Third Sector organisations was undertaken. There is no universal sample frame for third sector organisations in Australia. In order to accommodate the diversity of the sector, organisations were purposively sampled from a range of industries, and small, medium and large organisations were included (see Table One below). Small organisations were defined as those with less than five staff, medium organisations as those with between five and 15 staff, and large organisations as those with more than 15 staff. Sample selection was based on a web search of all domain names commonly used by third sector organisations in the Australian context (for example, .net.au, .org.au, .coop.au, .com.au) combined with a key word search using the terms ‘non-profit’, ‘not for profit’, ‘community based’, ‘cooperative’ and ‘third sector’. The third sector status and size of each organisation was then verified by review of their website and, in some cases, external verification through publicly available information from the relevant regulatory or peak body. Where verification could not be made, organisations were eliminated from the sample.

The sample included organisations variously incorporated as associations, companies limited by guarantee, cooperatives, and those (such as some religious organisations) incorporated under their own legislation. The sample ranged from transnational social movement organisations to locally based neighbourhood organisations. As identified in Table One, the sample included organisations operating in a range of industries and interest areas. In order to limit the analysis to the mobilisation of individual citizens (rather than other organisations), peak or ‘umbrella’ third sector organisations were not included in the sample. Further, in
order to focus the research on those organisations that are employing online technologies to support offline activity, recently established third sector organisations which are predominantly web-based were not included in the research.

Table One: Summary of Third Sector Sample by Size and Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Services</th>
<th>Large Organisation</th>
<th>Medium Organisation</th>
<th>Small Organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Services</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Culture</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest Group</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and related</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using Pattie and Seyd’s (2003) typology of civic engagement, sampled home pages were reviewed to identify the extent to which they facilitated one-off activities involving individual action (such as single donations, bequests, and petition signing), repeated or sustained, yet still individual, contact and activity related to the organisation (such as writing letters to political representatives, actively seeking information from the organisation about activities and events), and sustained activity involving dialogue and/or action with others (such as forming a local group, participating in an ongoing discussion, participating in an organised campaign, becoming involved in civil disobedience, and attending local meetings and events). In keeping with the Pattie and Seyd (2003) typology, these broad groupings were labelled respectively as individualistic, contact, and collective activism. A matrix of particular site features was developed to assess the types of activism facilitated. Fifty websites were reviewed over a four-day period in December, 2004.

A summary of website features and the types of activism with which they were matched is detailed in Table Two below.

Table Two: Website features by types of civic engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Activism</th>
<th>Website Feature</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic Activism</td>
<td>Online donation facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>News information on site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online merchandising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact Activism</td>
<td>Online Newsletter sign-up option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contact with organization available via site or email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Site feedback function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Activism</td>
<td>Information about events (off or online) / how to get involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online interactive activities (eg discussion forums, surveys, actions)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order for a website feature to be included in the matrix, it needed to be clearly accessible on, or directly linked to, the organisation’s home page without use of the site map. Data were analysed descriptively against the ‘levels of activism’ typology.

Results

Of the 50 websites reviewed, 24 had a high degree of functionality with regard to mobilising civic engagement (measured as presence of five or more out of a possible seven related website features), while only 4 of the websites sampled had a low degree of functionality (measured as two or less features). Only two of the 50 websites sampled contained all the civic engagement features included in the study. It is notable that both of these organisations were large social movement organisations with a transnational orientation.

With regard to Pattie and Seyd’s (2003) typology of civic engagement, the organisational websites sampled universally presented options for individualist engagement (such as online donating or membership opportunities), and inconsistently presented options for contact and collective engagement. In relation to contact engagement – that is, making contact with civic organisations – all websites reviewed provided direct online and offline contact details for their organisation, and 42 of the 50 sites presented information about the news and activities of the organisation on their home page. It is interesting to note, however, that more than two thirds of sites reviewed did not contain an explicit ‘site feedback’ function, by which the user can contact the site manager(s) to let them know if something on the site is not working.

With regard to collective civic engagement, 43 of the 50 sites provided information about how to get involved in the ‘offline’ activities of their organisation, including information about how to become a member or volunteer, information about specific events and group activities, and advice about how to establish like minded groups, where relevant. While there was a high degree of information about offline collective activity, such as meetings, fundraising events, and specific direct actions, the sample reviewed revealed very limited options for collective engagement online. That is, only nine of the 50 sites reviewed provided opportunities for online interaction via forums, discussion groups or surveys and/or opinion polls where collective responses were viewable and avenues for further engagement presented. Of these nine organisations, six were large organisations, two were medium and one was small. Five of these can be characterised as social movement organisations, while two were community service organisation which identified as advocacy organisations, and the others were a community arts organisation and a consumer cooperative respectively.

Discussion and Conclusions

Before considering the findings of the research, it is important to acknowledge two notable limitations of the methodology employed. First, the sample is limited to those third sector organisations that have an online presence. To more comprehensively assess the extent to which the Australian third sector is, or is not, utilising online technologies to mobilise civic engagement, further empirical research that includes organisations without websites would need to be conducted. Further, a ‘front end’ analysis of websites does little to explicate the extent to which particular web features are used by the public, nor the ‘back end’ use of information gained by organisations via their use of online technologies. For example, this research does not identify if and how third sector organisations are utilising information about traffic on their websites, or individual information collected via online donation features to further adapt their approaches to mobilising participation. Further empirical research in this area would provide more detailed insights into the extent and effectiveness of third sector use of online technologies to mobilise civic engagement.
Despite its methodological limitations, the research highlights, via systematic investigation of a relatively broad sample, the types of content about and opportunities for civic engagement presented online by Australian third sector organisations. As such, it illuminates a number of interesting findings.

First, the research findings suggest that there is a wide disparity in the functionality of Australian third sector websites in mobilising civic engagement. Across the organisational websites reviewed, the use of online capabilities ranged from very limited emphasis on individualistic engagement (through online donating functions and information dissemination) to a comprehensive emphasis on all forms of engagement, including online and offline participation through: donation, sponsorship or purchase of goods and services; provision of news, research findings, and updates on the organisation’s involvement in broader civic activities; information about specific volunteering activities and/or activist events; and interaction through forums, discussion groups, surveys and opinion polls.

One of the regular speculations about ICT use and third sector organisations is that there is a relationship between organisational size and ICT use; that is, smaller organisations with limited financial and/or resources are less likely to invest in ICT than larger organisations (Barraket, 2002). The findings from this research appear to support this speculation, with 14 of the 24 ‘high functionality’ websites belonging to large organisations, and all 4 ‘low functionality’ sites belonging to small organisations. This finding suggests that organisational size is a potentially more useful predictor of online technology use for the purposes of mobilising engagement than third sector status. It may also indicate that, in the face of resource scarcity, smaller third sector organisations do not view investment in online interactivity as the most effective or desirable means of facilitating or mobilising civic engagement.

As outlined in the results above, however, regardless of organisational size, there were limited opportunities for online participation and sustained interaction via the web or associated technologies, such as email. This relatively low use of the technology for fostering collective engagement online illuminates the most significant finding from this preliminary research. Overall, the organisations reviewed were making very limited use of the interactive or ‘communicative’ functions of online technologies, and tended to maximise the ‘informative’ and instrumental functions of the technology to a greater degree. That is, while the third sector organisations sampled were relatively consistent in the (one way) provision of information about their activities and opportunities for web users to become involved in face to face activity, there was a distinct under-utilisation of the features of online technologies to build ‘virtual’ collective engagement via two-way or multi-way communication. This suggests that, for the organisations sampled, ICT was being used to facilitate web-users’ engagement with the traditional activities of the organisation, but not to facilitate new forms of engagement as such.

Beyond the methodological limitations of this study discussed above, drawing universal conclusions about the effectiveness of the online presence of the Australian third sector in mobilising citizen engagement is potentially problematic due to the diversity of the sector itself. In part, the varying nature of the websites reviewed in this study reflect organisational differences, and the types of civic engagement valued or prioritised by third sector organisations with diverse objectives, orientations and resource bases. For example, large charitable organisations that rely on individual philanthropy as a primary source of financial support may conceptualise organisational participation very differently to grass roots social movement organisations that are explicitly concerned with promoting activism to achieve organisational objectives. While the limited utility of comparing all organisations within the
third sector must be recognised, the findings of this research do suggest that, sectorally, third sector organisations are using online technologies to enhance traditional methods of organisational participation, but are inconsistent in using these technologies to mobilise civic engagement in new ways.

This suggests that many third sector organisations are missing out on some of the vital benefits of online technologies. For example, these organisations are not encouraging meaningful feedback on their sites and they are inconsistent in giving people immediate opportunities to participate in or engage with organisational activities, or to build collective identity online. There are presumably many reasons for this, particularly resource limitations, but it is notable that even those that are relatively well resourced have been inconsistent in their employment of online technologies to enhance communication and collective engagement.

This research suggests that there is a long way to go if the Australian third sector is going to maximise the capacity of online technologies to mobilise civic engagement. In a policy environment where the third sector is viewed as having an increased role to play in public service delivery and/or the revival of social democracy, its capacity to connect with a diversity of people, to mobilise resources in multiple ways, and to provide mechanisms through which individual and collective identity is developed is of critical significance. While the relationship between civic engagement and online technologies remains largely untested, there is an emerging body of empirical evidence that tentatively indicates that ICT does impact on collective identity formation in general and patterns of engagement with the third sector in particular, at least for early adopters of these technologies. Research such as that conducted by Horrigan (2001) and Jennings and Zeitner (2003) indicates that ICT mediated civic activity is engaging people in new ways and, indeed, engaging otherwise uninvolved people in particular aspects of civic life. The Australian experience remains relatively under-researched, and these trends and their implications for the Australian third sector need to be better understood. For now, however, they suggest that online technologies are an emerging site of engagement, which third sector organisations must harness if they are to remain a relevant representative voice of civil society in the network era.
References


