Here is a summary description of our survey results at this time. In the months ahead we will post additional reports and analyses. If you are interested in a more complete discussion on these results and further analyses, send us an email and we will forward you a working draft of the complete paper. At the end of this summary we include a brief bibliography of the literature within which we situated our research.

EMONET Summary Results – November 18, 2006

Environmental Organizations and Communication Praxis: A Study of Communication Strategies among a National Sample of Environmental Organizations

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Introduction:

Environmental organizations (EOs) act in complex fields of public opinion, memberships, allies, opponents, government officials, other environmental organizations, and more. In this rich social context, EOs, like all organizations, must communicate and define their relationship to other social actors and institutions. Communication strategies – the methods and forms of communication utilized to achieve goals - are not independent of the social and technological context in which the organizations operate. Indeed, the communication strategies of EOs, we argue, are influenced in significant and predictable ways by their social and technological context.

Our study analyzes data on a national sample of nonprofit environmental organizations. We surveyed over 2000 organizations with over 400 organizations responding. We attribute our relatively high response rate to a successful methodology involving an initial sampling of EOs with either a website or email contact. Additional data was obtained from the National Center for Charitable Statistics.

The survey questionnaire asked representatives of EOs to rank communication practices for several organizational goals. These goals included: fundraising, membership recruitment and retention, publicity and education for members, publicity and education for nonmembers, communication between members, action alerts, field communication at mobilization or direct action, and for lobbying and petitioning. Table 1 summarizes the ranked responses (n=384) by organizational representatives, indicating the types of communication preferred for common organizational goals.

1 Research was funded with assistance from an award to Dreiling by the Williams Fund, University of Oregon, and by research funds by Nakamura from Senshu University. We are indebted to the assistance with data collection by Andrew Harmon, honors undergraduate in Sociology at the University of Oregon.
First, we observe that EOs use a wide variety of communication methods to pursue their goals. Notable is the high, and seemingly regular use of computer mediated communication, including email and websites. This should come as no surprise, as these modes of communication offer low-cost, flexible media with global reach. Yet not all EOs use these communication media at the same rate, and many EOs have clear preferences for utilizing specific media for specific organizational goals. For example, some groups may use direct mail to achieve a particular goal while others may rely more on their websites or email. Still others may use print media or radio while, for various reasons, these communication methods are out of reach for other organizations. Not only do the means of communication vary in general by organization, but also by the type of goal the organization is pursuing. One common goal, for example is fundraising. Referring to Table 1, we see that email is most preferred in four of the eight organizational goals (action alert, lobbying and litigation, com between members, publicity and education for members), with direct mail preferred in two of the goals (fundraising, membership recruitment and retention) and cell phones (field communication) and newspapers (publicity and education for nonmembers) preferred with one goal. Thus, we find EOs vary in their methods for communicating to different audiences.
In order to explain this variation, we identify some plausible explanations derived from the literature on environmental movement organizations. From these theories, we test several hypotheses about the relationship between methods of communication and EO characteristics. In the remainder of this paper, we explore how the methods of communication used by environmental organizations to achieve their goals correspond to their organizational resources, strategy and identity. Specifically, we employ multivariate analyses to explore the effects of organizational resource, strategy and identity variables on two dependent variables: the interactivity of communication methods and the costliness of communication methods.

**The Interactivity and Costliness of Communication Methods**

The goals of complex organizations, such as these EOs, can often be achieved by different strategies. Variation in strategies for organizations pursuing similar goals is likely to stem from organizational characteristics that shape organizational strategies and preferences. The choice an organization makes, whether to use newspaper ads or direct mail pamphlets to communicate to their members and the public is likely to vary by sociologically meaningful patterns. Do internal cultural identities or value-frames relate to the communication strategies preferred by the organization? Or do communication methods stem more directly from resource factors, such as scale of revenue?

The management of nonprofit organizations requires considerable attention to the financial consequences of different communication media. Large, resource rich EOs will likely possess greater discretion in considering more costly communication methods as well as possess the resources to develop internal organizational structures for using multiple communication methods. Consider information in Table 2. Here columns indicate the annual income classes of organizations and rows indicate the type of communication tools. (N=401) The left side of the table indicates the number of responses and the right is percentages within each class. It is apparent that the number of the communication tools used by EOs varies positively with their annual income. There is, however, no significant difference in the use of email and websites among the income classes. Furthermore, the table shows a reverse trend in the use of web logs, although the effective number of the response is small. In general, as evident in Table 2, we expect the choices that EOs make about the utilization of communication methods will vary by their scale of resources, from volunteers to income.
Based on the expectations of a cultural theory of social movements, we expect that the choice of communication methods by EOs will be in part determined by their ecological identities and their political strategies. This expectation, that *ceteris paribus*, cultural variables will exert an independent effect on the choices of communication methods. Indeed, examining Table 3 we observe a tentative relationship between the mean number of communication methods used by EOs and their principal identities and strategies. The numbers in each cell indicate the average of the total communication tools used by EOs. In each column, the organizations are grouped into quartiles based on the values from the coordinates from a correspondence analysis or the factor scores from a factor analysis of various survey response items (question 1.4a, 1.2a1, 1.2a3). The bottom rows consist of lower mean values of the scores or coordinates and the upper rows indicate higher mean values. Interpreting these values, we observe that EOs embracing a wider spectrum of ecological and social issues (i.e., their inclusivity) appear to utilize, on average, more communication tools than EOs embracing fewer issues. Similarly, EOs reporting a greater emphasis on political strategies for lobbying and litigating and for public education use more communication tools. This study suggests that the number of the communication tools used by EOs reflect factors beyond their financial ability or the scale of the organization. We explore this further by examining numerous independent variables that reflect the organizational resource and cultural identities of EOs and their relationship to two dependent variables measuring the level of interactivity and costliness of communication methods used by the EOs.

Table 2: Number of communication tools by annual income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of communication tools</th>
<th>non-$24,999$</th>
<th>$25,000 - $249,999$</th>
<th>$250,000 - $999,999$</th>
<th>$1,000,000 - more than $50,000,000$</th>
<th>non-$24,999$</th>
<th>$25,000 - $249,999$</th>
<th>$250,000 - $999,999$</th>
<th>$1,000,000 - more than $50,000,000$</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>9.80</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>7.26</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>5.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>9.80</td>
<td>14.53</td>
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<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>15.69</td>
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<td>8.51</td>
<td>11.69</td>
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<tr>
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<td>37</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>20.67</td>
<td>19.15</td>
<td>20.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>7.84</td>
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<td>26.60</td>
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<tr>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>13.00</td>
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<td>8.38</td>
<td>11.70</td>
<td>16.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>11</td>
<td>12.00</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|       | 51           | 179              | 94                  | 77              | 100.00      | 100.00            | 100.00               | 100.00          |
Table 3: Number of communication tools and factor scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average number of communication tools</th>
<th>Inclusivity of Socio-Ecological Identity</th>
<th>Organizational strategy of litigation or lobbying</th>
<th>Organizational strategy of educating the public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first quartile</td>
<td>7.188</td>
<td>8.027</td>
<td>7.473</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>second quartile</td>
<td>7.030</td>
<td>7.376</td>
<td>7.026</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>third quartile</td>
<td>6.840</td>
<td>6.922</td>
<td>7.156</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fourth quartile</td>
<td>6.440</td>
<td>5.684</td>
<td>6.342</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We asked EOs to rank three communication tools in the order of importance for achieving specific organizational goals (such as membership recruitment, fundraising, communication and mobilization, etc.). From the answers for this question, we constructed two dependent variables in the following manner: We assigned a number to each EO, which represents a weighted communication score summed over all organizational goals. This was determined by assigning a numerical value to each communication method and then multiplying that value by the inverse of the respondent’s subjective rank according to the importance of the designated communication method.\(^2\) In the case of our “interactivity” dependent variable, the resulting value indicates the degree to which each EO emphasizes more interactive methods of communication, as opposed to more directive (or one-way) methods of communication. These more interactive methods create more opportunities for dialogic communication and interaction whereas the more directive methods tend to prefer unidirectional or one-way forms of communication. In the case of our “costliness” dependent variable, the resulting value represents the degree to which each EO emphasizes costlier methods of communication as opposed to those that are less costly. Costlier methods of communication can obviously only be employed by those with sufficient resources. The resulting value indicates the degree to which each EO emphasizes either more interactive or more costly communication methods.

**Interactivity:**
Our first dependent variable is “Interactivity,” which represents our coding of the interactivity of the organizations’ preferred communication methods, on a continuum from more directive to more interactive. Cell phones, email and telephone (landlines) were considered more interactive and were thus assigned a numerical value of 3, while direct mail, magazines, newspapers, radio and television all are more directive in nature, and were thus

\(^2\) We summed scores assigned to each organizational goal, i.e. EOs that ranked direct mail, email and radio as their most important strategies for achieving membership recruitment, for instance, were scored a value (0-18) and then summed for all organizational goals. Each organization is assigned a total count based on the sum of \(G_1\) (e.g. fundraising) to \(G_8\) counts.
assigned a numerical value of 1. Text messaging, weblogs and webcasting were considered moderately interactive and were assigned a numerical value of 2.

Then we calculate a sum of products:

$$\sum \sum \text{inverse rank} \times \text{numerical value}_{ij}$$

i: organizational goal (n=8), j: weighted communication method (n=12)

Costliness:

Our second dependent variable is “Costliness,” which represents our coding of the costliness of the organizations’ preferred communication methods. As such, more expensive methods such as direct mail, magazines, newspapers, radio, television and webcasting were assigned a numerical value of 3, while slightly less costly methods such as cell phones were assigned a numerical value of 2 and the least costly methods of email, websites, web links and web logs were coded a numerical value of 1.

Conclusion

Our initial analyses lead us to the conclusion that the manner in which EOs utilize volunteers, the value they place in technical efficiency, the extent they use lobbying and litigation to achieve their goals, and the socio-ecological identities they adopt each uniquely shape the communication practice of the organization. The confluence of movement transformations and technological revolution in communication methods expanded opportunities for EOs to modify their electronic communication repertoire. In particular, the organizational resource capacity of EOs to mobilize and utilize volunteers positively relates to their use of more interactive and more costly communication methods. EOs whose organizational structures employ a mass marketing model, though probably preferring more costly methods, utilize less interactive communication models. Further research may allow a better understanding of how the historical waves of environmentalism structure distinct forms of communication praxis. We may also begin to analyze how it is that EOs respond in different ways to opportunities for transforming their communication praxis, perhaps in ways that require organizational innovation and transformation of previous communication methods. In general, we conclude that the historical and political context of environmentalism – particularly the rise of third wave and fourth waves of environmentalism, structured the communication praxis of EOs. The legacies of these historical developments in the movement appear to manifest as distinct forms of communication praxis.

REFERENCES

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3 Although it should be noted that email could also be considered a directive method, as email blasts without viable return addresses do not imply interaction as much as they do direction.


