

## **Feminist Network Activism and Education in Canada**

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*Abstract: This paper reports on a systematic analysis of 100 feminist organization websites. The purpose is to determine currency of the postings; relevance of content; and relationship between organizational mandate and Internet use. Data are grouped in three main categories: credibility and trustworthiness; education and advocacy; transparency and accountability. Implications are drawn for lifelong learning.*

The Internet is perceived to provide a tremendous opportunity for nonprofit organizations active in advocacy, education, networking and fundraising (Kenix, 2008). Feminist organizations have a particular interest in these goals, yet, little is known about how effectively these organizations utilize the web to accomplish their various goals. This research fills this knowledge gap and explores the digital divide that still exists in terms of the knowledge, skills and resources to use technology adeptly (see Middleton & Sorensen, 2005; van Dijk, 2005), particularly by community-based organizations. Given the implicit goal of feminist organizations to provide informal and formal learning for women, the use of ICTs (information and communication technology) is of considerable import to the field of adult education.

Feminist organizations, an established sub-sector of the non-profit world, typically have a political mandate to work for women's rights and to change the inequalities that exist in civil society (Ferree & Martin, 1995). In this paper, we use this broad understanding of feminism. This paper provides a systematic analysis of 100 selected websites for feminist organizations in Canada, with a particular emphasis on currency of the postings, relevance of content, and relationship between organizational mandate and Internet use.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is informed by several bodies of theory. The nonprofit literature points to the inadequate use of electronic networks to communicate and advance the cause of the nonprofit sector (Kenix, 2008). Particular attention is paid to the established relationships of trust and affiliation that these organizations have with the grassroots (Te'eni & Young, 2003) making them potentially effective channels for educational material as people seek reliable information through the Internet. However, small organizations face significant challenges to keep pace (Smith, 2007). When these organizations are not current in ICT, an opportunity is missed. There are deeper implications for organizational effectiveness in advocacy and policy engagement in the political sphere. Further, feminist theoretical contributions to the development of a gendered

understanding of Internet design and use, highlight gender's influence in perpetuating the digital divide, and how this affects the ways women learn and apply ICT skills (Faulkner & Lie, 2007). The cyberfeminist response promotes the potential of ICTs for women's empowerment, yet this approach is also criticized for masking deeper barriers (Rosser, 2005) and for reproducing essentialist notions of gender (van Zoonen, 2001). Finally, community informatics is an emergent theoretical area that addresses the intersection of community development and ICTs (Loader & Keeble, 2004). Although each of these areas has been developed separately and with overlapping purposes, little attention has been paid to the implications of ICT usage for feminist organizations in this context. The literature which does exist is primarily targeted in the Global South (see Hafkin & Huyer, 2006). We examine the Internet as a "gendered space" (Royal, 2008), and ask how this affects the ways feminist organizations create and maintain their web presence, ensuring the preservation and sharing of women's knowledge.

Foster and Meinhard (2005) warn of the credibility gap that many women's organizations face, which limits their "bridging" potential with other sectors, and access to funding. Foster, Meinhard, and Berger (2003) observe the challenges that such organizations have by virtue of their stress on social issues and relationship building, which sometimes position them as less than credible. The alternative organizational structure common to feminist organizations may place them in a precarious position (English, 2005). For instance, as donors investigate the websites of feminist organization applicants, the notion that they are risky could be confirmed by poorly maintained sites that inaccurately list staff or board names and provide dated information (see also Smith, 2007). Foster and Meinhard also note in the context of funding cutbacks, women's organizations need to collaborate to maintain funding levels.

### **Methodology**

This research consists of a systematic analysis of 100 websites of feminist organizations in Canada. Sites selected either self-identified as feminist or stated goals of women's equality and empowerment as guiding principles. As there was no single reliable directory from which to make our selection (personal correspondence with [charityvillage.com](http://charityvillage.com)), we began with the major provincial organizations (e.g., Status of Women Councils, Women's Directorates, [Womennet.ca](http://Womennet.ca)) and followed links from these sites. We selected independent and regionally located organizations that are less likely to rely on a well-funded overseer (e.g., YWCA, Women's Institutes). In some cases, a snow-balling technique was used when underrepresentation became apparent, to ensure a cross section of regional as well as rural/urban distribution was achieved.

To ensure consistency in our analysis, we focused on formal organizational websites, excluding activity on "web 2.0" social networking sites such Facebook or Myspace. Organizational sites are more likely to have the content we sought, as well they represent the more "official" online presence of an organization. Yet, we recognize that the 2.0 world is an area for further study.

Prior to analyzing the sites, several general indicators were established from the literature (above). We then grouped indicators under three main thematic categories. A number of key questions were generated within each area and used collectively to measure adherence to that category. Some questions were relevant in more than one category.

1. *Credibility or the overall appearance of trustworthiness and legitimacy*: are the organization’s mission and programs explained? is the posted content current including annual reports, events or activity schedules?; how recently was the website updated overall?; how functional and well maintained is the website?; overall, would the website be useful or be seen as credible for its intended audience?
2. *Education and advocacy*, or the degree to which the organization maintains and promotes lifelong learning and women’s rights: to what degree are the programs and activities described?; how comprehensive is the information provided (e.g., toolkits, resources)?; do they explicitly ally themselves with feminism?; do they create a gendered space?; how connected are they to similar organizations and causes?; do they actively promote membership or volunteerism within the organization?
3. *Accountability or transparency* refers to the organization’s clarity about their use of funding and who their donors are. This category was comprised of the following questions: is there an annual report and is it current? who are the donors? what are the results of funded research?

Each website was handcoded according to these questions. Data collection occurred over a 3-month period and was carried out by the authors only to maintain consistency of criteria and coding. These data were compiled into Excel charts for analysis. To confirm our data attempts were made after a 3-month period to revisit each site. In four cases, the sites no longer existed or the domain names were for sale.

### **Findings**

One hundred organizations were assessed, representing the following regions: 41 organizations in western provinces (AB, SK, BC, MB); 25 in Ontario and Quebec; 28 in Atlantic Canada (PE, NB, NS, NL); and 7 in Northern Canada (NWT, NU, YK). We further sorted them as resource centres (n=50), advocacy organizations (n=22), and shelters or victim services (n=28). The findings are reported here consistent with the three categories of questions identified in the Methodology section. Discussion follows our Findings.

#### *Credibility and Trustworthiness of the Sites*

Since credibility is a major issue raised in the assessment of nonprofit organizations (Foster & Meinhard, 2005; Smith, 2007) we included it in our analysis. Credibility is of vital importance for the ability of women’s organizations to survive and function well. The condition—currency, accuracy, openness—of the website is an indicator of its functionality as a reliable source of information and reflects on the organization’s own trustworthiness.

As Table 1 shows, many of these organizations lack currency –updated in the past 3 months— and in general are not reliable sources of current information. Fewer than half (46%) posted events on their website that were current. In addition to currency, we looked at accuracy and content. When this was assessed, only 57% of the websites were graded as credible sources of information overall.

Table 1: Trustworthiness of Organization

	All=100	RC=50	A=22	VS=28
Mission Statement is Present	83	36 (72%)	19 (86%)	28 (100%)

Annual Report is Present	13	9 (18%)	1 (5%)	3 (11%)
Annual Report is Current	11	9 (18%)	1 (5%)	1 (4%)
Events Posted are Current	46	31 (62%)	5 (23%)	10 (36%)
Overall Website is Current	59	33 (66%)	10 (45%)	16 (57%)
Newsletter Posted is Current	20	12 (24%)	2 (9%)	6 (21%)
Website Works Well	58	30 (60%)	11 (50%)	17 (61%)
Overall Impression of Credibility	57	29 (58%)	10 (45%)	18 (64%)

*RC=Resource Centre; A =Advocacy Organization; VS=Victim Shelters/Services*

Advocacy agencies were least current (Table 1). Status of Women Canada has withdrawn advocacy funding as part of an overall federal agenda of financial accountability and efficiency, which may have had an impact on the maintenance of these sites. Further research is required to investigate this. Overall, we recognize that there may well be inadequate funding available to support technology. Estimates on building a website typically start at \$2,000, and annual maintenance often costs in excess of that amount.

### *Education and Advocacy*

As feminist organizations promote lifelong learning, engage in advocacy work, and encourage volunteerism (see Kenix, 2008), it is surprising that so few of these sites did well in these category. As shown in Table 2, while 76% of all websites surveyed described programs and services offered at their centres, only 37% had bona fide educational content available online (e.g., fact sheets on domestic violence, voter awareness guides, toolkits for health promotion). Over half (53%) of all websites were classified as containing only “brochureware” (Cukier & Middleton, 2003), general information about the organization and services that can be found in a printed brochure. There is little incentive to visit the website more than once, as a visitor would not find useful information on issues of interest. Resource centre sites were least likely to provide in depth information, indicating that they do not have the capacity to expand or consider their role as an information provider in an online format. Advocacy groups and victim services were much more likely to make educational content available on their websites.

Table 2 Education and Advocacy

	All=100	RC=50	A=22	VS=28
Educational Content	37	10 (20%)	11 (50%)	16 (57%)
Programs Described	76	43 (86%)	9 (41%)	24 (86%)
Links Maintained	20	10 (20%)	4 (18%)	6 (21%)
Use to Other Organizations	37	16 (32%)	13 (59%)	8 (29%)
Gendered Space	81	41 (82%)	18 (82%)	22 (79%)
Feminism Defined	34	20 (40%)	9 (41%)	5 (18%)
Brochureware Only	53	35 (70%)	4 (18%)	14 (50%)
Activism Promoted	32	14 (28%)	16 (73%)	2 (7%)
Involvement Encouraged	63	32 (64%)	14 (64%)	17 (61%)

Overall, only 32% of organizations promote social justice issues and activism on their websites. Advocacy agencies, being more aware of the importance of being strategic in making their research available and educating people on social justice issues, were much more likely to provide substantive content online. Such content included research findings, fact sheets on issues such as gendered aspects of poverty, activity around election campaigns or controversial

legislation. One would expect that all types of organizations would want to encourage involvement, yet only 63% of the sites visited provided information on how to join the organization as a member or volunteer.

An element of advocacy is building group identity and shared vision and history. A strategic and typical way for feminists to do this on the web is to create a “gendered space” (Royal, 2008). Almost all sites had signifiers of a gendered orientation whether it be use of the second-wave feminist color purple or stereotypic images of women, flowers, and children. Half of the sites displayed purple prominently. Regardless of the organization’s focus, 81% of them had a gendered web design, while 34% were explicit in calling themselves feminist (Table 2).

One implicit demand of the web is that it serve as a literal web, linking sites and information. For women’s organizations this is key since it is a way to create community and to share resources, and ultimately create alliances for activism and lobbying. In general, users are referred to sites by friends and trusted authorities (Ethan Zuckerman on CBC Radio, *Spark*, January 17, 2009). As well, they often rely on “links” pages and judge the worth of a site (and its sponsor) by the reliability of the links. Although 63% of the websites surveyed had a links page, only 20% of the sites had reliable and updated links (Table 2). For this study, we generously identified a links page as being maintained if no more than 10% of the links were broken (i.e., directing to pages that no longer existed). Most links pages were very poorly maintained even by organizations otherwise reliable in terms of content. There was very little evidence of “deep linking,” guiding people to specific sources of relevant information; the majority referred to general agency homepages with no direction on the site’s purpose or how to use it. One wonders, for instance, how a link to the Government of Canada homepage would help someone who is looking for statistics on women’s employment or information on how to fill out tax forms for an elderly parent. It is discouraging to see so much time and effort that, ultimately, is wasted when the content is not well maintained or organized. Overall, such consistently high occurrences of outdated or limited content suggest that these websites are underutilized and ineffective as educational tools and supports, or as reliable archives of organizational knowledge.

*Accountability and Transparency*

Accountability or transparency refers to organizations’ identification of donors and use of funding. This category was considered important given that nonprofits are donor-dependent, in this case, funding mostly comes from Status of Women Canada, United Way, and provincial governments. Donors typically demand that organizations are transparent about spending and activities and acknowledge them. Yet, only 50% of these organizations explicitly name donors on their websites, and only 40% identify their paid staff or volunteer board members (See Table 3 below). Only 11 organizations surveyed had links to a current annual report. Clearly, the use of the web to be accountable was low.

Table 3: Accountability and Transparency

	All=100	RC=50	A=22	VS=28
Overall Impression of Credibility	57	29 (58%)	10 (45%)	18 (64%)
Donors Named	50	27 (54%)	11 (50%)	12 (43%)
Funded Research is Present	37	16 (32%)	14 (64%)	7 (26%)
Annual Report is Present	13	9 (18%)	1 (5%)	3 (11%)

Annual Report Current	11	9 (18%)	1 (5%)	1 (4%)
Website Functions Well	58	30 (60%)	11 (50%)	17 (61%)
Webminder is Identified	35	21 (42%)	4 (18%)	10 (36%)
Staff /Board Identified	40	24 (48%)	9 (41%)	7 (25%)

### Discussion

This review of websites of feminist organizations shows that while many have a web presence, it is typically underutilized. In the past, discussion of Internet issues for women emphasized the need for increased access (Shade, 1996) and support (Scott & Page, 2001). Statistics Canada's *Canadian Internet Use Survey*, reports steady increases in access to the Internet, with the most recent numbers reporting a rise from 67.9% in 2005 to 73.2% in 2007, with no demonstrable differences by gender. Increased access has enabled organizations to answer the cyberfeminist call for women to claim Internet space with the creation of their own websites. Unfortunately, many of these initiatives appear to have stalled in the Cyberfeminist Period. Many organizations initially acted upon this potential, but are now unable to sustain the call.

A parallel emphasis in the nonprofit sector instills the belief that a the mere existence of a website increases an organization's credibility, which motivates organizations to establish a web presence, yet many fail to consider their ability to ensure ongoing support (Kenix, 2008). This problem is magnified for feminist organizations as the cost of building and maintaining sites, still typically masculinist work, is cost probative to women's organizations dependent on cyclical and uncertain funding.

As Huyer (2006) notes, "meaningful social practices" (p. 27) are far more important than mere use, given the capacity of the Internet to aid women in effecting large scale social policy change. We are mindful, however, that increased usage will not be unproblematic. Fenton (2008) explains that the web can be a diffuse space where "proliferation lead[s] to a multiplication or fragmenting of forces" (p. 38). We heed her advice that a deliberate effort needs to be made to facilitate purposeful interchange and organization.

### Implications and Future Directions

This paper contributes to the building of theory between community informatics and feminist organizations. As well, it reinforces the suspicion that there is a continuing (and deepening) digital divide, which feminist nonprofits are failing to bridge. There seem to be innumerable missed opportunities for feminist organizations to share knowledge, educate the community and give voice to the marginalized. The role of nonformal learning, while a key element of service provision to clients, is equally important for feminist organization staff members themselves to develop the knowledge and interest to use ICT effectively in social justice work. This study sets the foundation for further research in which we would study organizations that are excelling in this area.

This study explored one small but organizationally important element of women's internet presence—websites of feminist organizations. We suggest that feminist organizations themselves might conduct further research on who is actually using their sites. They might also look internally at strategies for integrating their website into their overall mission (Smith, 2007, p. 274).

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