Community in Cyberspace: Gender, Social Movement Learning and the Internet

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Abstract: *Feminist nonprofit organizations are sites of informal and nonformal learning where citizens learn advocacy, literacy and the practices of social democracy. With the growing use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the nonprofit sector, there are questions as to how well organizations are able to make use of this technology to further their goals of promoting social movement learning and activism. This paper reports on a systematic analysis of 100 websites for feminist organizations in Canada. Websites are evaluated for content, currency, and maintenance, to determine how well these sites contribute to the work of these organizations. Implications are drawn for learning and teaching in the community-based sphere.*

The Internet is perceived to provide a tremendous opportunity for nonprofit organizations active in advocacy, social movement learning, educational programming, 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 Internet to accomplish their objectives. 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 goal of feminist organizations to promote informal and formal learning opportunities for women, the use of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) is of considerable import to the field of adult education. We need to know a great deal more about how they use these ICTs to promote learning, what the barriers are, and what needs to be done to further their supports for informal learning, as well as their credibility as facilitators of learning. To address this gap, we report on a systematic analysis of 100 websites for feminist organizations in Canada. We evaluate these websites for content, currency, and maintenance, to determine their usefulness as sites of learning and activism in the community.

As we wrote this paper, we were reminded of the importance of social movement learning for adult education (Hall & Clover, 2005; Walter, 2007). ICTs seem a natural medium to facilitate this learning and activism. The entire Iranian protest in June-July, 2009, against the "re-election" of Ahmadinejad, was mobilized through Twitter, websites, blogs, and email, with some of the organizers located a world away. This continued the practice of online learning and activism that has grown in the region in recent years particularly by women's rights activists (Rahimi & Gheytanchi, 2008). Chinese authorities are well aware of the effectiveness of the Internet, having blocked certain websites and email chatter—practices that anti-censorship protesters mockingly call the "great firewall of China." Corporate interests also permeate the

Internet as search engines increasingly prioritize advertising and commercial sites. Ignoring the influence of the Internet in the context of such state and corporate control is not an option, especially for marginalized, threatened, and politically disadvantaged groups who realize the need to have their voices heard and the need to use the Internet for lifelong learning purposes.

Community-based feminist organizations represent socially and economically marginalized people and are often located in a marginalized space themselves within the nonprofit world. They typically have a political mandate to work for women's rights and to change the inequalities that exist in civil society (Ferree & Martin, 1995). Feminist nonprofit organizations accomplish this agenda through nonformal (workshops and short courses) and informal (everyday) adult learning strategies that are politically attuned. They provide educational programming; social movement learning about advocacy, change, and feminism; literacy services; and mentoring and coaching. Feminist social action groups of the 1970s have formalized over time to create the well established community-based women's resource centers, political lobbying groups, anti-violence agencies and shelters that exist in the nonprofit sector today.

Definitions of ICTs vary, but primarily refer, broadly, to the range of technologies available to facilitate communication, community at the grassroots level, and information sharing. Typically these are computer-mediated forms such as the Internet, including email and the World Wide Web (popularly called *the net* or *web*). They also may refer to mobile phones, handheld computing devices, or even pre-computer technologies like community radio (Hafkin & Huyer, 2006).

Since the 1990s, feminist organizations have moved their visibility online through the creation of websites to ensure their presence in this vital realm. Yet, there are continuing questions of how feminists have used the Internet to further their own causes and activities (Gorman, 2008) and suggestions for how they might do this effectively (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004). In reviewing 100 websites for feminist organizations in Canada, we place particular emphasis on their usage for the broad purposes of social movement learning about advocacy as well as organizational accountability. The questions that guided our research were developed to assess the degree to which the websites:

1. Promote adult learning through the provision of reliable and relevant content online;
2. Engage in advocacy and awareness raising of issues which are important dimensions of social movement learning;
3. Are publicly accountable to funders. This is important in order to build relationships of trust and credibility with donors, to be transparent about the value of their work, and to encourage future donors;
4. Encourage social interaction, community building, and online engagement which are critical dimensions of adult learning.

While the examples provided here are based on the Canadian context, there are implications for women's resource centers, and issues of knowledge sharing, facilitation of adult learning, and networking in the broader context.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is informed by several bodies of theory. The nonprofit organizational 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 community (Te'eni & Young, 2003), making them potentially effective conduits of educational material as people seek reliable information through the Internet. When these organizations are not current in ICT, an opportunity is missed. There are deeper implications for organizational effectiveness in advocacy and policy engagement, as well as activity in the political sphere.

Foster and Meinhard (2004) warn of the credibility gap that many feminist organizations face, which limits their "bridging" potential with other sectors, and access to funding. This tension is sometimes articulated as collectivist versus bureaucratic (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). Foster, Meinhard, and Berger (2003) observe the challenges that nonprofit 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 potential 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 outdated information (see also Smith, 2007). Foster and Meinhard also note, in the context of funding cutbacks, that women's organizations need to collaborate to maintain funding levels. Postill's (2008) research shows that as computer networking skills increase, so does local social networking ability (computer mediated mobilization). Organizations that fail to engage citizens are at risk of being excluded from this funding loop.

Further, feminist theoretical contributions to the development of a gendered understanding of Internet design and use highlights gender's influence in perpetuating the digital divide, and how this affects the ways women learn and apply ICT skills (Faulkner & Lie, 2007). While barriers to ICTs are widely analysed (Smith, 2007), critical analysis of the potential of this technology for empowerment in practice is under researched.

Most of the available literature that deals with the potential and usage of ICTs in education focuses on formal learning environments, such as classroom technology or distance e-learning instructional methods. Some research provides more critical analysis of adult learners (e.g., Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006), and specifically women's learning in ICTs. Butterwick and Liptrot (2003), for instance, are interested in how women without formal ICT credentials learn the technology in order to become more effective in their workplaces. Similarly, most of the literature related to ICTs and adult learning focuses on the realm of individual learners (e-learning), or computing skill attainment, though social movement learning in this context is now emerging. Crowther, Hemmi, and Martin (2008) are looking into how ICTs, mainly email and chat forums, are used in several organizations to mount social activism campaigns; yet, their research is emergent and does not focus on websites or everyday, informal learning among women. In the same way that adult educators have paid close attention to informal and nonformal learning in physical community spaces such as parks (Taylor, 2006), and in social movements such as the environment (Walter, 2007), we are challenged now to look at how learning can be supported and promoted in cyberspace.

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, except for a few cases of strategies developed in the Global South (Buskens & Webb, 2009; Carrasco, Hopenhaym, & Clark, 2008; Hafkin & Huyer, 2006). Much of it points to a rush for women to "get on the net" as evidenced by a flurry of case studies promoting online engagement (e.g., Vogt & Chen, 2004).

Conferences such as the World Summit for the Information Society, in 2003 and 2005 have included discussions on gender and ICTs raising questions about how policies and funding issues affect women's use of ICT (Cooks & Isgro, 2005). Yet, the results have been mixed. We examine the Internet as a "gendered space" in which gender-specific cues, images and other content are specifically used to appeal to their intended audience (Royal, 2008). Feminist organizations typically use such cues as the second-wave feminist color purple, the iconic ♀ symbol, or stereotypic images of women, flowers, and children. We ask how this gendering affects the ways feminist organizations create and maintain their web presence to foster learning for women. We are especially interested in moving beyond who has computer access to how she uses the web. How might she use the web to make sure that women's knowledge is cached and disseminated? While there are multiple published qualitative cases of how individual ICT projects are piloted and implemented (e.g., Crowther et al., 2008), there are limited available studies of usage and usability, and certainly none specific to multiple community-based feminist organizations.

In the 1990s, discussions regarding the "digital divide" (who participates with ICTs and who is excluded) detailed the various factors limiting access for women, and for women's organizations (see Shade, 1996). Data from Statistics Canada, which reports usage statistics every 2 years (*Canadian Internet Use Survey*), now show little demonstrable difference in access according to sex, with 70-80% of Canada's population having regular access. Yet, we know little about this 20-30% without access. The current digital divide debate has shifted from mere access to more significant issues of how the Internet is used, understood, and controlled. Van Dijk (2005) describes a "deepening divide" in which marginalization is magnified: "The more information and communication technology is immersed in society and pervades everyday life, the more it becomes attached to all existing social divisions" (p. 2). Nonprofits have a role to bridge this divide, identifying these marginalized groups as their audience (opposed to corporate sector that targets potential consumers). Further, they can give voice to these sectors which are denied other avenues to make their perspectives visible.

Methodology

This research consisted of a systematic analysis of 100 websites of feminist organizations in Canada. We restricted our study to organizational website use rather than personal blogs or social networking sites. Although organizational websites are somewhat more static than the "web 2.0" social networking landscape (e.g., Facebook, Myspace, blogs), they were more reliable for analysis and comparison purposes. Also, websites represent the formal online presence of an organization, making them more likely to have the educational content and official organizational information we were seeking. Yet, we recognize that the Web 2.0 world is an area for further study, particularly in adult education (Kop, 2008), despite the critique of it as furthering hyper-individualism and as avoiding collective action and activism (Gorman, 2008).

As there was no single reliable directory from which to make our selection (personal correspondence with charityvillage.com, March 12, 2009), we began with listings provided by the major provincial organizations (e.g., Status of Women Councils, Women's Directorates, and the online directory Womennet.ca) and followed links from these sites. In some cases, a snow-balling technique was used, particularly when under-representation became apparent. Our particular focus was on independent and regionally located organizations that are less likely to have a national and securely-funded overseer (such as the YWCA). All organizations selected demonstrated a commitment to addressing gender-based inequalities.

To ensure a broad representative sample, we selected 41 organizations in western Canadian provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan); 25 in Ontario and Quebec; 28 in Atlantic Canada (Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland); and 7 in Northern Canada (Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Yukon). We further sorted them by primary focus of these organizations as resource centers (n=50), advocacy organizations (n=22), and shelters or victim services (n=27) to help determine any differences relating to the purpose or focus of the organization.

Prior to analysing the sites, several general categories and assessment criteria were established from the literature (see Tables 1 and 2). Based on the literature reviewed above, a number of key questions were generated within each category relating to the types of content provided and evidence of website maintenance. Each website was hand-coded according to the categories that appear in the tables. 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. For the purpose of this analysis, we have summarized these categories into two main themes:

1. *Credibility & Accountability:* This category was comprised of the following questions: Are the organization's mission and programs explained?; Is the information presented current?; How recently was the website updated?; How well is the website maintained overall?; Is there an annual report and is it current?; Who are the donors*?;*
2. *Education and advocacy:* This category assessed the degree to which the organization maintains and promotes lifelong learning and women's rights, and was comprised of the following questions: To what degree are the educational offerings described and updated?; How comprehensive is the information provided (e.g., toolkits, resources)?; Do they explicitly ally themselves and promote social movement learning about feminism?; How connected are they to similar organizations and causes? How likely are other organizations to use their content and to learn about their work and programming?

We were unable to determine usage of the websites since site counters were, for the most part, not provided on the websites. When counters were active, no start date was listed, so there was no way of determining the span of time that usage was measured. To confirm our data, attempts were made after a 3-month period to revisit sites. In four cases the sites were no longer available or the domains were for sale.

Findings

The findings are reported here consistent with the two themes identified in the Methodology section. Discussion follows our Findings. Data are categorized according to type of organization.

Credibility and Accountability

In this section, we were most concerned with the presentation and operation of the organization as evidenced by its website. How well does an organization present itself through its content and operation of its website? Is the work and reputation of the organization enhanced or compromised? This category is important because it precedes and determines women's Internet usage, and affects their potential learning and engagement with feminism and its practices. Furthermore, if the website is not credible to donors, they are not likely to see the

valuable work that the organization is engaged in. An opportunity to create trust and meaningful relationships and potential or continued funding is lost.

Credibility

Since credibility is a major issue raised in the assessment of nonprofit organizations (Foster & Meinhard, 2004; Smith, 2007) we considered it important to assess this area. The issue of 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 of the organization's own trustworthiness.

Table 1: Credibility and Accountability of Organization

	All=100	RC=50	A=22	VS=28
Mission Statement is Present	83	36 (72%)	19 (86%)	28 (100%)
Staff /Board Identified	40	24 (48%)	9 (41%)	7 (25%)
Programs Described	76	43 (86%)	9 (41%)	24 (86%)
Annual Report is Present	13	9 (18%)	1 (5%)	3 (11%)
Annual Report is Current	11	9 (18%)	1 (5%)	1 (4%)
Events Posted	74	44 (88%)	11 (50%)	19 (68%)
Events Posted are Current	46	31 (62%)	5 (23%)	10 (36%)
Overall Website is Current	59	33 (66%)	10 (45%)	16 (57%)
Newsletter is Present	37	23 (46%)	6 (27%)	8 (30%)
Newsletter is Current	20	12 (24%)	2 (9%)	6 (21%)
Donors Named	50	27 (54%)	11 (50%)	12 (43%)

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

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. Events listings were poorly maintained. Finding out current activities is typically a common reason for a person to visit an organization's website. Yet, only 46% of all websites had an up to date list of activities. Of those advocacy and victim services agencies sites that did post events, only half were current. In several cases they had not been updated in years. While availability of a newsletter was low to start with, this was an area that was typically not well maintained, with only an issue or two available, and often, what was provided was not current. Under half of the sites with a newsletter section actually had a recent issue posted.

Noticeable differences occurred in terms of purpose of the website and the organizational mandate. Within the 100 organizations, those oriented to advocacy were least current. Possible reasons might include loss of funding from Status of Women Canada (the main federal agency responsible for supporting women) which withdrew advocacy support as part of a stated overall federal agenda of financial accountability and efficiency. However, further research is required to investigate this link.

We have only to think of how reputation of an institution matters in higher education to realize how important it is that a website be credible. Potential users make their determination of the worth of the site based on similar factors such as credibility. They are less likely to return if the site is not up to par.

Accountability

Accountability refers to organizations' identification of donors, demonstrated use of funding, and operational transparency. This category was considered important given that nonprofit organizations 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 their support. Yet, only 50% of these organizations explicitly name donors on their websites, and only 40% identify their paid staff or volunteer board members (Table 1). Clearly, the use of the web to be accountable was low.

In not naming their donor and identifying fundable work or support, the organization faces a lack of legitimacy to future donors and furthers the downward spiral of insufficient funds to do a growing body of work. Funds are required to keep websites up to date; if not, website maintenance is volunteer dependent. It would seem likely from our study that many organizations struggle with a short supply of available technical skills and suffer as a result. There were several cases that looked like the website was developed through a grant or some such "one-off" *pro-bono* or funding effort, in which the site was not touched after this initial setup.

As a nonprofit organization, a women's center is more or less compelled to provide up-to-date annual reports and to help funders and sister organizations be aware of what they do. Yet, in this study, we found that only 13 of the 100 organizations actually posted an annual report on their website. We speculate that the often casual governance models employed by these organizations (English, 2005) may contribute to this issue. For instance, an organization that is trying to follow a collectivist model, which is feminist and participatory, might experience some tension with the reporting and application requirements of most funding bodies, including government. With a website to provide insight into the organization, this disjuncture between collectivist and bureaucratic operational modes becomes public and may result in the organization being labeled as less than competent (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). Furthermore, the fact that only 40% of websites gave employee and board members' names might justifiably cause a donor to question the lack of transparency. In the case of crisis services and shelters, there may be a conscious intention to withhold staff names for safety concerns, in which case the listing of job titles with contact information was considered to be an acceptable alternative, and was accounted for in the results. Nevertheless, only 25% of these organizations made such information available.

In part because the collectivist operational model that is inclusive and participatory is favored by many feminist organizations, especially those that started in the second wave of feminism (1970s and 1980s) there may be less internal emphasis on hierarchy and more internal disdain for patriarchal structures like business and government. Yet these are the very structures that are likely to provide funding to nonprofit organizations. So, it is significant that 50% of the organizations we studied did not name their sources of funding or demonstrate how these funds were used.

Education and Advocacy

In this section, we focus on the websites in terms of content relevant to their education and advocacy use. Typical objectives of feminist organizations include furthering lifelong learning, supporting social movement learning, doing advocacy work, and promoting volunteerism (see Kenix, 2008), which made it surprising that so few of these sites did well in

this category. As shown in Table 2 only 39% of the organizations surveyed had *bona fide* educational materials (e.g., fact sheets on incidence of violence, toolkits). This misses a key important role of providing information to support self-directed learning (Crowther et al., 2008). Many websites (56%) contained "brochureware" (Cukier & Middleton, 2003), general and brief information about the organization and services that one would normally find in a printed brochure, thus not making use of a website's information sharing potential. A list of services with a brief description of each, and with accompanying telephone numbers, would be an example of this. While more cost effective to reach a larger audience, brochureware or static descriptive content limits the potential of ICTs to provide access to more thorough information or to serve as an effective conduit of social movement learning. Consequently, there is no incentive to visit the website more than once, as it provides no educational service. Resource center sites were least likely to provide in-depth information, indicating that they do not consider or have the capacity to expand their role as an information provider in an online format. Most organizations (70%) used their websites to promote services at their center as opposed to toolkits and useful information (e.g., for tax preparation, for voter awareness). Organizations that had a more focused website purpose, such as shelters for women affected by abuse, were more likely to consider posting content specifically relevant to their clients.

Table 2 Education and Advocacy

	All=100	RC=50		A=22		VS=28	
Educational Content	36	9	(18%)	11	(50%)	16	(57%)
Brochureware Only	50	34	(68%)	4	(18%)	12	(43%)
Funded Research is Present	37	16	(32%)	14	(64%)	7	(26%)
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%)
Activism Promoted	32	14	(28%)	16	(73%)	2	(7%)
Donations requested	44	22	(44%)	3	(14%)	19	(70%)
Involvement Encouraged	63	32	(64%)	14	(64%)	17	(61%)
Links Maintained	20	10	(20%)	4	(18%)	6	(21%)
Website Works Well	58	30	(60%)	11	(50%)	17	(61%)
Overall Impression of Credibility	57	29	(58%)	10	(45%)	18	(64%)

Overall, only 32% of organizations actively promote social justice issues and activism on their websites. Advocacy agencies, being more aware of the importance of strategically making their research available and educating people on social justice issues, were much more likely (81%) to provide substantive content online. 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 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. Drawing on Royal's (2008) conceptualization of a "gendered space" on the Internet, we were interested in how feminist organizations identify themselves through their websites. Over 80% of the sites had a clear gender orientation. Among resource centers and advocacy groups, approximately 40% identified themselves explicitly as feminist. On this criterion of shared

identity, the organizations did well. Aboriginal sites clearly designed their sites to show their identity, however, they drew from aboriginal imagery and color schemes more than gendered symbols.

By its very definition, the World Wide Web serves as a literal web, linking sites and information through an interconnected network. 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. In general, users are referred to websites by friends and trusted authorities (Ethan Zuckerman on CBC Radio, *Spark*, January 17, 2009). As well, they often rely on "links" pages—listings of other recommended websites—and judge the worth of a site (and its sponsor) by the quality and 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 identified a links page as being maintained if no more than 10% of them were broken (i.e., directing to pages that no longer existed). We allowed this margin of error given the frequency with which website addresses change. Overall, 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. These organizations, for the most part, would be better not to have links pages at all than to leave such unhelpful lists on their websites.

A newsletter is often the most public record of an organization's activity, particularly by smaller groups that do not normally produce formal publications. There is a wealth of primary source material from second wave feminism through the newsletters published by the groups forming at that time. See for example, Duke University's *Documents from the Women's Liberation Movement* (http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/). The University of Ottawa's text-based collection, *Canadian Women's Movement Archives,* provides a critical record of second wave feminist organizing in Canada. Through organizational websites, individual groups can create their own archive of this precious historical record. Sadly, this is not being done broadly. As women's organizations shift their documentation to electronic, there is little evidence of a concerted effort to maintain this material for long term preservation. In a generation, we may well know more about feminists of the 1970s than we do of grassroots activism today. The importance of documentation of social movements is illustrated in Walter's (2007) research on the Clayoquot Sound environmental protest in British Columbia, in which he relies at least in part on Internet archives of environmental organizations.

Depending upon the type of organization, one third to one half of the sites did not have well maintained and useful websites, suggesting they are underutilized and ineffective as educational tools and supports, or as reliable archives of organizational knowledge. We recognize that there may well be inadequate funding available to support technology yet we are concerned that so many organizations are doing poorly in this area. When we think of rural women, for instance, who have less access to learning services and supports, we realize that ICTs matter considerably to them. Women who are in need of information to access services for victims of abuse, or to enroll in a literacy program, are disadvantaged by the inadequacy of these sites. Adult educators working in the community and in these organizations have less of an opportunity to reach out to these women. They are restricted to face-to-face contact which is limited for women who are confined by reasons of shame, low literacy, victimization, and

geography. And, given that access to ICTs is increasing in every other sector, the issue becomes all the more urgent.

The overall impression of credibility, admittedly, is a subjective measure. This was determined by looking at the website as a whole in its presentation, given the amount of information provided, the site design and layout, how recently it was updated—despite various individual shortcomings, did this website reflect a credible and active organization? As a website visitor, would someone be confident in the accuracy of the information and the work of the organization? When this was assessed, only 57% of the websites were graded as credible sources of information. Of some concern was the fact that advocacy agencies, which rely on credibility to influence public thinking on issues of social justice, did a poor job of presenting themselves through their websites. When we think of how important it is that learners find us as teachers credible, honest, and current, it seems a shame that these characteristics cannot be said of the very sources/websites that we have developed as teaching tools.

Cases for Examination

This review shows that while many feminist organizations have a web presence, it is typically underutilized. Many organizations seem to have stalled in the cyberfeminist period of developing an online presence, then lacking the ability to maintain it. Access, as Shade (2004) notes, does not equal use. Huyer (2006) concurs. She notes, "meaningful social practices" (p. 27) are far more important than mere use, given the capacity of the Internet to help women learn how to effect large scale social policy change.

To illustrate the range of ways feminist organizations utilize their websites, and to provide a basis for our discussion of the adult education implications, we briefly describe the websites of select organizations included in our study that contribute to education, research and collaboration. These are not necessarily the most technologically or graphically advanced, but they demonstrate an online presence that maintains a legitimate organizational presence and fulfills their educational roles to clients, and networking roles with sister organizations.

Womanspace Lethbridge (www.womanspace.ca) in Alberta actively promotes the organization's activities and fundraising events through its website. Although the site has some technical problems, content is maintained and updated. There is evidence of a broad base of donor support including local business. In addition, it maintains a good newsletter archive. Similarly, the St. John's Status of Women's Council and Women's Centre (http://www.sjswc.ca/) also helpfully provides an archive of the council's newsletters, and media exposure. It also provides research reports that other organizations might find helpful, such as their "Hammer and Nail" project raising awareness on housing issues that women face. It seems clear that as a teaching and learning tool, this site is credible and authentic. It facilitates the self-directed learning that Crowther et al. (2008) identified as important.

Quebec Native Women / Femmes Autochtones du Quebec (http://www.faq-qnw.org/index.html) is an example of a well maintained bilingual website—in this case content is provided in Canada's two official languages, English and French. While we did not find many bilingual sites in our research, the few we did see tended to be stronger in one language or another. The website's purpose appears to focus on the organization's advocacy work. The organization provides a comprehensive list of research reports and briefs that they have presented to government as they advocate on issues ranging from the environment, youth justice, and indigenous rights.

Looking at organizations with a single focus, there was variation in purpose, audience, and quality. Adsum for Women and Children (www.adsumforwomen.org) is a well designed and maintained website that appears to be directing its online activities to donors rather than clients. Donation and volunteer information is prominently displayed and online donations are sought. They also provide an archive of recent newsletters. Bryony House (www.bryonyhouse.ca) has a balance of information directed toward donors and to clients. There is clear, concise information on causes and forms of domestic violence, and suggestions on how a woman can create an "emergency plan." While the content is little more than "brochureware," it does provide the basic information that a client in crisis may need and is easy to read.

Battered Women Support Services (www.bwss.org) of Vancouver, BC provides a comprehensive newsletter, current newswire and information brochures that can be downloaded. They also have a comprehensive range of policy and advocacy material. They take a broad view of the issues related to domestic violence and provide educational support around these issues, such as homelessness, immigration law, indigenous rights, family law, and child welfare. The Women's Health Clinic in Manitoba (www.womenshealthclinic.org) also takes a holistic approach to its field—in this case, health. The site covers issues not expected of a "clinic." In addition to wellness information, which includes feminist analyses of "body image," the site addresses the broader social determinants of health such as housing, poverty and education and lobbies on behalf of women for policy change. As a proponent of lifelong learning, the clinic has a particular mandate to promote education of women, encouraging community participation and support.

Implications and Future Directions

This study explored one small but organizationally important element of women's Internet presence—websites of feminist organizations in Canada. There seem to be innumerable missed opportunities for feminist organizations to share knowledge, engage in community-based learning and give voice to the marginalized. Adult educators who work in the community sphere such as Crowther et al. (2008) need not only to look at successful attempts to use ICTs for social movement learning and activism, but also to ways in which ICTs are not being used effectively. As our "classroom space" is much larger than a higher education classroom, we need to be aware of the barriers and enhancers to informal learning in the community, on the Internet, and in nonprofit organizations, especially those oriented to social movement learning. Our ability to keep pace with the use of ICTs for learning is a measure of our ability to move with the times and to address adult learners' needs. Adult educators were able to meet the media revolution in the 1960s and 1970s; the question remains if they can keep pace with the current ICT challenge especially as it relates to women and learning for change.

Education observers are aware that the Internet has become a site for informal learning and a repository of valuable research data (Walter, 2007). Selwyn's et al.'s (2006) finding that considerable informal learning is occurring on the web underscores the need to pay close attention to what citizens research and how. If adult educators located in feminist organizations want to ensure quality learning experiences with credible content they need to pay close attention to how they are doing in this regard, and to make learners want to access their sites. Considering the potential of ICTs to increase educational participation and outcomes, factors which Selwyn et al. emphasize, adult educators need to think a great deal about their content, their methods, their presentation and other factors outlined in this study. When community-based and marginalized populations are concerned, adult educators have a definite role. One suggestion is given by

Mehra et al. (2004) who describe a project in which African-American women were involved in the development of website content, which engaged them directly in the knowledge creation process and empowered them. Given the perceived inability of the mainstream media to promote feminist content and to provide adequate information on marginalized populations and services, the need for women to be involved in the content development process would appear to be immediate.

That said, there is a continuing, and deepening, digital divide, which feminist nonprofit organizations are failing to bridge. This study sets the foundation for further study of specific organizations that are excelling in this area and how they have overcome problems that apparently remain as barriers for many women's organizations, especially in the area of learning. The main outstanding issues arising from our study are:

- Work and advocacy are required to address the unstable funding situation and to identify more effective ways to support ICT development and use as an educational medium in the community-based and nonprofit sector;
- Strategies are needed to assist organizations to develop websites that are better aligned with their educational mandate. These strategies include the use of participatory approaches with organizational staff, clients, and other groups to help in the development of relevant content that furthers their civil society agenda;
- Attention needs to be paid to organizational effectiveness, possibly through increasing attention to a credible web presence that meets clients' learning needs and furthers social justice;
- Education is needed both in technical maintenance skills, and in the wider-ranging issues of information sharing;
- The use of ICTs as instruments of social movement learning needs to be explored further and promoted.

We are mindful, however, that increased usage will not be unproblematic. Fenton (2008) explains that the World Wide 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. We suggest that these organizations themselves might conduct research on who is using their sites, such as conducting user surveys and tracking website use statistics. The cases described by Scott and Page (2001) and Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop (2004) provide methods and strategies for participatory website work. Organizations might also look internally at strategies for integrating their website into their overall mission for justice (Smith, 2007).

Adult educators who have had an enduring interest in how women learn and in how to remove barriers for this learning will be interested in research along these lines. The question becomes for us how to use our resources and our sometimes limited ICT skills to facilitate this learning and to use it as a means of promoting our varied social movement agendas, be it in terms of feminism, the environment, politics, or indigenous rights. The community is leading, and our field needs to keep pace.

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