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NGO, Information Flow and Nation: An Exploration in Relationships

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the relationship between the non-governmental organization or NGO, the nation-state and the production and flow of information in order to articulate the tensions between the three. In the process, it will explore the relationships that can be fostered between the library community and the NGO to facilitate the development, dissemination, and storage of information. The flow of information both in and out of developing nations is of particular interest to both the NGO and the government. How do the avenues of information used by NGOs combine and conflict with government information policy? How can we, as librarians, support and expand the dissemination of information so essential to the work of the NGO?

NGOs, the nation-state, and information are all terms that have different meanings to different audiences. It is therefore helpful to define these terms in the context of this paper, and to provide a brief history of the growth of these organizations. The NGO or non-governmental organization has been with us since the middle of the nineteenth century as a societal actor. Arguably some of the prototypes for the development of the NGO were actually inter-governmental organizations such as the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine in 1815, which sought to regularize river traffic. Representatives on this Commission came primarily from Eastern Europe, especially the states which are now Germany. In Constantinople the Superior Council of Health was organized in 1838 to deal with communicable diseases. This Council included representatives of European states and the Ottoman Empire. Although as few as five international non-governmental organizations may have existed prior to 1850, the multiplication of these organizations was striking by the turn of that century. Iriye (2001) maintains that the growth of international non-governmental organizations was in many ways the precursor to the global society. Today, the phrase "NGO" conjures images of organizations as diverse as Amnesty International, OXFAM, Greenpeace, and the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade (RMALC). Non-state actors known as NGOs share the world with a variety of organizations such as the donor-organized non-governmental organizations (DONGO), the governmentally-organized non-governmental organization (GONGO), the quasi non-governmental organization (QUANGO), the grassroots organization (GRO), and the intergovernmental organization (IGO) among others.(Reinalda, 2001) Diverse social and economic issues are the focus of these organizations, as they mirror the presence of civil society, and touch upon areas as diverse as religion, women's rights, environmental resources, agriculture, and myriad other areas.

The growth of non-governmental organizations has been almost as exponential as the growth of the Internet and has sometimes been seen as part of the process of globalization. If we agree with Iriye's historical viewpoint, the NGO presaged the development of globalization as a factor in the development of internationalism. The development of NGOs before and after World War I was quite rapid. Whether in spite of, or because of, the devastating "War to End All Wars" and the Great Depression, the growth in the number of NGO's was steady. The 1940s saw the advent of the NGO as a societal actor, but the true political power of these organizations was yet to be realized. Exponential growth in the number of NGOs occurred at the end of the twentieth century. The Yearbook of International Organizations listed 16,000 internationally recognized NGOs in its 1993-94 edition and 63,000 international non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations in the 2004 electronic edition of the work. (1994a,2004b) It is interesting, but not surprising that the rapid multiplication in the number of NGOs coincided with the expansion of the Internet as a tool for the dissemination of information.

Several definitions of the non-governmental organization exist in the political science literature. Michael O'Neill divides NGOs into nine types in the United States.(O'Neill, 1990) His view of the NGO rests on the organization's orientation - whether it is toward religion, private education and research, healthcare, arts and culture, social sciences, advocacy and legal services, international assistance, foundations and corporate funders, and mutual benefit organizations. Gerard Clarke (1998) from the University of Wales, Swansea, defines NGOs as "…private, non-profit, professional organizations with a distinctive legal character, concerned with public welfare goals." Suter (2003) defines them as "any organization outside the government, such as the public service and the defense forces, and business." Reinalda and Verbeek (2001) identify two defining characteristics for the NGO in an analysis of power relations. They agree with the definition in the Yearbook of International Organizations that identifies NGOs as "organizations which have not been founded, and are not formally controlled, by national governments." In going beyond the Yearbook's definition, they maintain that a second characteristic for these organizations is pursuit "by private means private objectives that are likely to have domestic or transnational public effects."

As we can see, several themes are frequently repeated when attempting to define the NGO. They are not governmentally supported or founded, although government policies might have been a major reason for their genesis. They usually have defined goals and objectives relating to the creation of a civil society. They work, at least ostensibly, at the grass-roots level to provide aid, education, and, most importantly for the librarian, information both to the audience they are trying to provide relief for, and to a wider audience of policy-makers, state organizations and funding agencies. Suter (2003) refers to them as the "warning voice" that things are not as they should be in a just and equitable society. Often times, this warning voice is perceived as interference with the sovereign rights of the state. When this occurs, a great deal of tension can be generated between the government and the agency in the pursuit of humanitarian or societal ideas. A common example of this tension is the inability of relief agencies to effectively provide food and medical care in war-torn areas. It is not unusual in these events to find that relief agencies have had communications technology impounded by the regime in control of contested areas, and, indeed, to have lives lost in attempts to provide humanitarian assistance.

It is helpful to view the relationship between the NGO and information from a model that reflects the NGO's point of action. Korten (1990), Elliot (1987), and Clarke (1998) have each discussed this approach, and the method can be useful to the librarian to ascertain information production as well as information needs. In this model, three generations of NGOs are described. The successive generations of NGOs work with a gradually expanding audience and base. The flow of information is both upward from the NGO and downward to the individuals the NGO serves. The generations are not mutually exclusive. That is, there exists a little part of generation one in generation two or three, a little bit of generation three in generation two, and so on. The model reflects the maturity of the organization to some extent, but maturity in this sense should not indicate a lack of purpose or organization at any level.

The first generation NGO works within a community to provide welfare and relief to local populations, focusing on crisis intervention by providing food, health care, and other vital services. At this point, the primary flow of information is into the organization from the larger political, social and economic arena. Information obtained is processed and made relevant to the local community by the organization. The information produced by the NGO at this point is targeted at the user population, and also the funding agency. It provides the raison d'etre for the NGO's work. The organizations at this level are frequently referred to as People's Organizations or the GROs earlier mentioned.

The second generation NGO is involved in development projects at the local level. The projects might include water supply improvements, sanitation, agricultural production, and general education. The information provided to funding bodies is still very important. However, this generation is usually somewhat established. Like the first generation organization, the focus remains at the local and regional level, using economies of scale to provide assistance and aid. Also, like the first generation NGO, these more mature organizations remain downward focused and generally avoid overt political organization and mobilization of clientele. Information flows are toward the target population, but the volume is greater and reflects more expertise in handling problems than the younger organization.

The third generation NGO is likely to work both locally, nationally, and internationally in attempting to mobilize support for an issue and build coalitions. Many of these organizations base their work on the "conscientization" and mobilization concepts developed by Latin American liberation theologians such as Assmann, Gutiérrez and Fanon. These are the organizations that most effectively use the mass media. They publish regularly and use a variety of means to get information out to the public. The nature of their work makes it important for them to access the international arena. These organizations also often provide assistance to a groups of similar organizations, ensuring a means of communication between the smaller units, and when possible, resources as well. They frequently act as coordinating councils.

Third generation NGOs most frequently provide the warning voice we as librarians should pay attention to. Whether their purpose is to improve the position of the groups with which they work, or to affect change within a society, the "warning voice" organizations are most heavily involved in the production of information. This may appear in the form of briefing papers, case studies, reports, and working papers, or it may appear in a format that is formally published. The papers detailing the history of the organization may also be available, in addition to information required by the government under which the NGO works.

In a recent work, Leonard (2002) points out another important function of the third generation NGO. In writing about alternative forms of diplomacy, he indicates the importance of NGOs in working with civil societies throughout the world. "NGOs have three key resources not readily available to foreign governments: credibility, expertise, and appropriate networks." How do NGOs, in the age of globalization, work to engage states in their response to social, political, and economic issues? Very few of these organizations would make a claim of actively influencing policy. Organization, education, and information are the primary tools of the NGO. These tools are used most often in the international arena to provide interstate discussion or interstate coercive pressure to affect change.

What is the relationship of the NGO, as we have defined it here, to the nation-state? The Westphalian system and the neo-realist schools of political science would have us believe that there is no relationship, or at least no relationship that has meaning. In this view of the world, only the nation-state, with clearly defined, though often artificial, physical borders and governance, has the power to affect change. The state is the only actor in the power relationships between countries. Today, however, we are much more attuned to the global nature of power relationships and the interdependence of our species. The forces of globalization have blurred the borders of the state. In the European Union the effects can be seen quite clearly as the member nations try to deal with varying national policies and publics. What is referred to as the "normalization process," is actually the negotiation and mediation of state policy, primarily in the areas of commerce and immigration.

Suter (2003) articulates several characteristics of NGOs that weaken any arguments that the organizations are not a viable force in international politics. First, he recognizes that NGOs provide an alternative focal point for the loyalty of some citizens. Next, in this age of communication, they show that governments do not have a monopoly over information and ideas. Further, NGOs can be very adept at using the mass media for their campaigns. NGOs provide an alternative for those who wish to work for a better world. And, finally, they are being recognized by intergovernmental organizations that grant various forms of consultative status to the NGOs enabling them to take part in the work of the larger organization. These IGOs sometimes provide support for the NGO in the form of expert advisors and observers, and sometimes receive expert advice and important information in exchange. The work of the International Red Cross/Red Crescent in Iraq is an excellent example of this relationship.

Different nations have different reactions to the development of organizations within their boundaries that seek to share power. In more democratized areas, these reactions range from encouragement to benign neglect. In other cases, the development of organizations that give voice to the intrinsic problems of an area is frowned upon and varying controls are in place to prevent any thought of power sharing or governmental influence by these organizations. In still other states, the development of NGOs is fostered and sometimes the goals and influence of the organization are co-opted for political ends. Even those who continue to cling to the Westphalian theory of nationhood are beginning to recognize the importance of the NGO as a societal, if not political actor.

Recognizing that the state and the NGO do interact with each other, where and when does the state have the ability to influence the information production possibilities of the NGO? The British Parliament's All Part Parliamentary Group for World Government commissioned the One World Trust, one of its divisions, with the creation of a report concerning disclosures by a variety of international organizations. In January 2003 the "Global Accountability Report" was released. In surveying seven NGOs, only four published annual reports online and only three provided financial information with their reports.(One World Trust, 2003) This type of reporting by NGOs has become a major issue in recent years. As the state begins to impose regulatory terms on them, these agencies are expected to become more open about their organizational structures and as a result more information should become available.

But financial reports are not the only internal documents produced by the NGO. Much of what is done in the organization appears in the form of briefing papers, case studies, and programming suggestions. Several initiatives are underway to assist in the capturing of the internal documents of a variety of NGOs. The University of Colorado at Boulder began collecting archival materials on human rights NGOs in the 1990s. These materials were identified as vitally important documents to help understand the human rights movement. The availability of documents on the founding, history, and discoveries of these organizations were a driving factor in the development of the archive.(Montgomery, 1996) A different type of activity is exemplified by the Latin American and Caribbean Regional Health Sector Reform Initiative. Through the Latin American and Caribbean Center on Health Sciences Information a searchable database of grey literature from NGOs and government agencies related to the health policy is available.

Oxfam is a prime example of the third generation NGO that produces and networks its information. It has been successful in organizing and accumulating its rich information resources. This organization is over sixty years old. It has over 170 offices with over 2,700 staff workers in countries around the globe. It is a member of The Oxfam International, an umbrella organization for twelve distinct NGOs throughout the world, most in countries that have been members of the Commonwealth, as well as the Netherlands. The British headquarters houses a library that holds about 16,500 books, 120 journal titles, grey literature, reports, and audio-visual materials. Books, journals, working papers and annual reports produced by the organization are all held in this library. In addition, Oxfam established a corporate archive in 1994. The Archive includes papers of the governing body, policy-making groups, correspondence, country annual reports, evaluation, reports from project visits, photographs, film, video and audio tapes, slides, and artifacts. Currently the organization is considering a proposal from Thompson – Gale to microfilm some of their most important series of primary materials.(Stephen, 2003)

The Internet has been a great asset for the NGO. If the organization has access to the technology required for Internet publishing, getting information about the problems being addressed by the organization is easier than it has ever been before. The problem here lies in the ability to obtain the necessary hardware and the availability of supporting infrastructure. Much has been written of the information haves and have-nots in developing nations. In this manner, technology is a double-edged sword for the NGO. The Internet and mass media have been very useful in getting the messages of these organizations into the public realm. The ability to recognize a potential human disaster or the warning voice, has been used repeatedly in such areas as famine in Saharan Africa, human rights abuses in Kosovo, or the AIDS epidemic in South East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The ability to capture and archive this information is relatively easy for the librarian in the developed world because the channels of communication are so transparent. In theory, it is possible to watch for movements of large numbers of refugees in order to make relief supplies and efforts more sensitive to the shifting population, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In practice, it is still difficult to safely and effectively move the necessary technology into areas that are in turmoil. Distrust not necessarily of the individual aid worker, but of the threat this technology poses often impedes humanitarian relief organizations.

Where does this leave us as librarians? What can we do to mitigate the negative effects of governmental information and information technology control and lack of expertise or resources on the part of the NGO?

The Environment Liaison Centre International, a non-governmental organization serving a network of environmental and developmental NGOs throughout the world, published a study of the information needs of NGOs in the Pacific, Africa, Asia and Latin America in 1990.(Marcharia and Muya, 1990) One of the results of the study showed that 405 of 550 respondents claimed to have libraries or information centers within the administrative structure of their agencies. A full 98.1% of all agencies responding indicated a need for the development of their information sources to support the work they were engaged in. At that time, print was the preferred form for materials. Modes of communication of information included telephone, telex, fax, and e-mail.

It is possible to assume that the preferred mode of communication today would be the Internet! The Internet poses its own set of problems for access to NGO information production. The problem with this system of information distribution is closely related to its value as well. Although Internet access is almost ubiquitous, providing an information infrastructure unsurpassed through the ages, the distributed nature of this information is problematic as well. The scholar or researcher can easily use it for known resources, but the deep web is difficult, if not impossible, to navigate. Much of the available material remains unknown, even to the most intelligence search engine, if it is not properly indexed through metadata entry. The government official and the administrator are frequently tempted to treat search results in the same manner as the undergraduate at any U.S. university, looking at the first page or two of Google results and not digging any deeper.

Another problem with Internet access lies in the different standards that might be used to provide information sites. Different levels of funding, government control, philosophy of use and service, and technical capabilities play a part in increasing the difficulty of access to information posted by the NGO. Reliability in access and content will remain a problem for some time.

This, of course, leads to the question of the technological haves and have-nots. A great deal of writing is currently being done on the problem of the information rich and the information poor in this globalized environment. Although the Internet is ubiquitous, it is not universally available to each and every member of society, or even each organization working within the society. Until the problem of access is solved, there will continue to be lost threads in the web of information. Developing nations do, however, have the opportunity to play technological leap-frog, skipping over the old infrastructure development. An example of this would be the proliferation of cell phone users outside of the developed nations. Much less is required in the way of physical development of infrastructure as the virtual development forges onward.

It is perhaps time to perform another assessment of the information needs of NGOs. Although the number of organizations has increased since the time of the last study, it would be possible for many of us, as members of research communities, to study the information needs of a variety of NGO's. Geographic or topical limiters can be employed to investigate the resources of these organizations. In fact, a series of surveys, done by a dispersed number of librarians would be extremely helpful in defining the information requirements and resources of a large number of NGOs.

While these studies are being completed, what other strategies can we as librarians articulate in order to implement the capture of information created by NGOs? First, we can do what librarians do best – network with each other and our communities to discover what types of materials are being produced. Many of us in academic libraries are being drawn further into the digital world. The existence and proliferation of digital repositories for the information being created on our own campuses can be used to create similar archives of NGO information production. The advantage to this strategy is the ability to use our skills in organization to make the materials easy to access in a standard format. In addition, many of us work with scholars actively engaged in the study of NGOs who are acutely aware of the resources of some of these organizations. We need to tap these personal networks of knowledge as well.

Another way to network information is by joining one of the NGOs active in providing library assistance to NGOs. One such organization is CHARM (Charity Archivists and Records Managers Group at http://www.archives.org.uk/srg/srgaffliated.asp#charm), which works specifically with records of philanthropic organizations such as Oxfam, NSPCC, and The Children's Society in Great Britain. Library associations, which are non-governmental organizations themselves, may have committees and sections doing this type of work as well. If the organization to which you belong isn't working in the area, it provides an opportunity for you to develop an initiative.

On a very small scale, it would be possible to go to the Yearbook of International Organizations and choose one or several agencies to contact. Cooperative agreements can be made by which materials produced at your institution could be sent in return for materials from a variety of others. Several of these reciprocal agreements exist at a large number of universities. The exchange benefits both parties, bringing in materials that the small, under-funded NGO needs for success, and providing a record of its activities, publications, and reports for those working in the field in the future.

The question of technology transfer and acquisition is much more complex. Yes, the Internet has found its way to even the most remote corners of the world. The question to ask is, "Who controls the Internet in any given country?" Many organizations that can afford the equipment necessary for joining the online community find their ability to communicate reduced by a degraded or non-existent infrastructure. The price of technology has gone down appreciably in the last decade, but there is still a disparity of access provision. The effects of this disparity are most visible in the delivery of health services to communities in developing countries. A report concerning Healthlink Worldwide, which works in a number of these countries to improve the delivery of health related information and communication, shows the disparity in resources, and the disparity in the acceptance of technology in various populations. The services of the organization are provided in a variety of formats, but a study of their work in Tanzania showed that "Health workers value textbooks more than newsletters and journals, even though the latter may hold information of similar quality, and are cheaper to obtain." (Hammond and Richardson, 2003).

Digital archiving, networking, and communicating with NGOs will provide our libraries with very rich resource material. It will also provide the NGO with the opportunity to get their messages out. The new Center for Global Studies at the University of Illinois is very interested in engaging in a process of archiving, networking, and communicating in this area. We invite you to join us in our work to make the valuable and difficult to find information of the NGO available to those who need and desire these resources. If technology continues to support the goals of these agents of civil society, the warning voice will be heard more clearly and with greater urgency in the future.

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