DIGITAL RESOURCES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

–LUCY BERNHOLZ

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, an association of new fathers has led a robust, ribald and rather successful social media campaign to encourage natural childrearing practices, using little more than a hashtag. Their goals complement those of a few civil society organisations (CSOs) in their region, whose professional policy advocates try to keep track of the irreverent dads via social media. Knowing what their informal allies are up to is critical for the CSOs in their work directly with families, as well as their efforts to influence public policy.

Keeping track of the Twittersphere, (or Weibo-sphere, WeChat-verse, or WhatsApp-sphere, depending on where and who you are) is just one small way that digital tools and infrastructure have changed civil society. These tools have given many activists and organisations new ways to do their work and new conceptions of scale. They've introduced a new pricing equation into our thinking, as we increasingly understand that when we're not paying in cash, we're likely paying in data. And they have, or should have, changed the 'where do you work?' question for individuals and organisations, to include both local and digital presences. Digital environments are a complementary context for how and where we do our work, and what we need to do it.

Digital infrastructure and data are critical resources for civil society. No technology has ever reached global saturation as quickly as the mobile phone. We use our phones, whether smart or basic, for an ever-expanding range of tasks. Far beyond person-to-person communication, we are increasingly depending on our mobiles for market updates, literacy training, community organising, disaster preparedness and response,

and network building. Digital data and infrastructure are core mechanisms for public discourse, fundamental elements of public utility, and instrumental to civil rights, information access, medical care, innovation, education and countless other dimensions of modern life. As we shift more and more services to the mobile web, we've shifted the nature of digital divides - from basic access to broadband access, from basic mobile to high speed, and from those who can only consume to those who also create. Some countries are successfully leapfrogging expensive built infrastructure, while others only dream of doing so.

PROMISES NOT REALISED

We once thought that digitisation was cheap. Rapid adoption of social media tools by low-resource organisations was at least partly driven by the ability to set up and use accounts with no costs other than time and energy. But as organisations of all kinds, from libraries to museums to local agencies to small community organisations, have invested in digitising their materials, they've quickly learned about the hidden costs of these tools. These can include everything from server costs to security measures, staff time to beneficiary privacy. For cultural organisations in particular, the push to make their collections available online has made clear the double-edged sword of digitisation. It costs money to do it and to maintain once done, but no one has yet figured out the how these resources might pay for themselves. Instead, online access to a museum's collection or an archive's pictures often reduces the very foot traffic that used to (barely) pay the bills. Not only is digitisation not cheap, but it may also cannibalise existing revenue streams.

The digital age promised us the accelerated democratisation of everything from information access to philanthropy. By many measures, more people from more places and from more backgrounds have access to information and each other than at any other point in history. But we've also seen that one result of faster, more distributed information access can and has been faster, more concentrated exertions of existing power structures. The battles between repressive regimes or systems of surveillance and the supposed safety of anonymous, dispersed networks of activists have led to a new arms race. Governments and corporations extend themselves in ways that only the well resourced can. Those who seek spaces for unmonitored online conversations, ownership of their own digital data trails, or choices about how their digital activities are tracked and by whom, are caught are fighting on more fronts at once than ever before.

Finally, it is becoming apparent that the economics of the digital space vastly favour those who own the systems over those who use them. The creation of enormous wealth for the few who engineer the technology comes at the cost of jobs and security for those whose work is being automated. The gaps between the wealthy and the rest of us seem to be expanding ever faster. In the parlance of Silicon Valley, the disruptive economics of the digital age have indeed come home to roost, but few governments or politicians have yet rewritten the elements of the social contracts being torn apart by these disruptions.

Six fundamental principles of civil society are being remade in the digital age. These are:

1. Free speech and expression
2. Peaceful assembly
3. Privacy

4. Consent
5. Ownership
6. Public accountability

Putting these principles into action digitally will be the context for and shape of civil society to come.

DIGITAL IS INTEGRAL

We must put aside the small questions of how to raise funds on mobile phones or whether or not to use social media. Civil society - globally - must recognise the existential nature of digital data and infrastructure. The questions we must ask about resourcing civil society in a digital age are fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of civil society:

- How will we assemble peaceably in digital spaces that are constantly monitored by corporate and government interests?

- What rules of expression will hold across national lines, cultural expectations and global network systems?

- Who will own the data that we generate when we use these systems?

- What forms of governance can we create to protect our abilities to act collectively in digital spaces?

How will civil society answer these questions? Companies are offering free internet access to poor communities, relieving governments of the cost of building infrastructure, but in turn limiting the users to the companies' online sites. Will this practice, known as zero-rating, be a boon for low-income populations,

or a means of shifting basic information access from a public to a private resource? Will civil society carry a commitment to access and fairness into the digital sphere? Doing so will require pushing governments and corporations to invest in open digital access so that all people have all opportunities. Will civil society continue to limit its definition of resources to discussions of financial investments, and concentrate on policy battles about tax credits or corporate social responsibility? Or will we engage in the digital policy fights - about data ownership, digital surveillance and free expression - that are foundational to the idea of civil society?

The resource discussion for civil society can no longer revolve around money. Digital innovation means we need to recalibrate our own understanding of how and where we do our work, and what we need to do it. Yes, funding is a critical resource, but it is not the only one. CSOs need to:

- Understand how digital assets, resources, and infrastructure work - (hint: it's not the way financial assets do) - to advance our missions, and understand when they are working against us.

- Use the right digital tools for our missions - some devices and habits won't help us achieve our goals.

- Treat everyone we interact with as a donor to our causes - a data donor. And all that data demand respect and protection.

- Recognise the secondary digital resources that our work creates that might serve a public benefit, and design our work so those benefits can be realised.

- Learn how to use digital data and infrastructure safely, securely, ethically and effectively.

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- Access the growing world of intermediaries for digital capacity building, which can help organisations achieve their missions.

Funders need to:

- Realise that digital is not optional. It is a complementary space for all civil society actions.

- Integrate digital skill building and organisational practices into their core operating support, their capacity building efforts and their pursuit of effective organisations.

- Identify the ways in which digital data are shaping public policy on their issue areas, and equip their grantee partners to respond appropriately.

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Civil society as a whole needs to consider three new kinds of resources for the 21st century:

- Software codes: digital tools - from cell phones to satellites, cameras to street sensors, databases to drones - run on software. Software is designed by people, and often (literally) coded to default to certain values. What information gets collected and stored, and what choices users can make about the log of information on them - these are all software defaults. We need robust, diverse, value-driven software that doesn't put protestors in harm's way, that can be used securely in dangerous places, and that are appropriate to the built infrastructure that exists.

- Organisational codes: CSOs of all kinds need to learn how to use their own digital data safely,

securely, ethically and effectively. This knowledge needs to be informed by policy and programme staff as well as technologists and lawyers. The rights and privileges of all donors to an organisation - not just financial donors but beneficiaries as well - need to be respected and protected. Digital policies will become as important to good governance as financial and human resource policies. Good, informed practice will matter even more.

- Legal codes: civil society needs to engage actively in policy making about digital access and equity, civil rights and civil liberties online, data consent, data privacy and data ownership. How these issues get decided will determine if and how cultural expression, protest, organising and philanthropic activity take place with digital resources and in digital environments.

The digital technologies that shape our world are only going to become more pervasive. It isn't civil society's job to keep up with the pace of digital innovation. But it behoves civil society to lay claim to principles and practices for using digital resources that can withstand the next waves of change, encompassing embedded sensors, 3D printing, drones, pervasive surveillance, wearable technologies, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, genetic hacking and space exploration. It behoves civil society to include both the informal social media networks of concerned Indonesian fathers, the professional associations and non-governmental organisations that work on their shared issues of child and maternal health, and the digital data and infrastructure that binds them together.

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