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Technology-Based Approaches to Social Work and Social Justice

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Technology-Based Approaches to Social Work and Social Justice

Judith M. Dunlop
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ABSTRACT. Electronic advocacy is an emerging and exciting development in social work that requires both practitioners and educators to learn technology-based approaches to promoting social justice in the twenty-first century. Social software (often called “free software”) offers increased technological opportunities for nonprofit organizations concerned with advocacy and social justice. Social work educators and practitioners have been slow to adopt information technology (IT). This article suggests a need for integration of traditional and electronic advocacy models for practice in the twenty-first century. Failure to incorporate technology-based approaches into the curriculum puts social workers at risk of practicing with outmoded knowledge and skills in an increasingly cyber-active world.

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The development of social software or free software has created exciting opportunities for social work practitioners and nonprofit organizations (NPOs) to level the playing field between “haves” and “have nots” in the information age. The creation of social software (free software) represents a move toward equality as nonprofit organizations, previously shut out of the information technology arena, are no longer excluded. Although information technology (IT) can be used as a tool to extend traditional advocacy methods, it is too expensive for most nonprofit organizations. With the advance of social software or “free software”, nonprofit organizations can play a major role in the development of electronic advocacy by sharing their knowledge and expertise with diverse stakeholders across multiple technological routes.

Thus, the utilization of social software has quickened the pace of change in nonprofit organizations and broadened the strategies that help to create effective advocacy. Electronic advocacy has been defined as a social work practice method that uses high technology to influence policy decision making (Fitzgerald & McNutt, 1999; Hick & McNutt, 2002). Social software alone does not promote electronic advocacy. In the twenty-first century, the route to electronic advocacy is a partnership between IT-skilled social workers and service providers who strive to become technologically competent. Of concern then is whether social workers can provide this expertise and assist organizations to: (1) enter the information age, (2) use technology-based approaches to help disadvantaged populations, and (3) implement electronic advocacy practice to promote social justice in local communities. Considerable commitment is needed to change the social work curriculum so that social work practitioners can use technology-based approaches and assist NPOs to enter the information age and implement electronic advocacy practice.

This paper begins with historical perspectives on social work advocacy and examines both traditional and electronic advocacy practice. Next, it explores various types of social software or free software that would be useful to nonprofit organizations. Finally, it theorizes about the application of social software to social work advocacy practice in this century.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: SOCIAL WORK ADVOCACY

A comprehensive look at social work advocacy practice throughout history is beyond the scope of this paper; however, a brief review illuminates its importance to social work practice. Social work's history of advocacy for social change spans more than 100 years (1869–1999) (Rothman, 1995; Weil & Gamble, 1995). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Charity Organization Society and the Settlement House Movement were actively involved in their own versions of advocating for social justice. Workers associated with the Charity Organization Society directed their advocacy efforts to individuals and families who were unemployed and poor. In contrast, the Settlement House Movement advocated for marginalized populations at the neighborhood level. During the 1920s and 1930s, social work as a profession became preoccupied with psychiatric casework and Settlement House workers gradually turned their attention away from social action strategies to educational and recreational programs (Trattner, 1999). In the 1940s and 1950s, focus shifted back toward community organization and the 1950s paved the way for the development of a model of social action based on labor and neighborhood organizing (Alinsky, 1971).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the development of advocacy planning advanced social action in community organization practice (Rothman, 1967; Alinsky, 1971; Lauffer, 1978). The social and political changes in the 1960s encouraged the development of radical or structural models of practice that challenged the government's top-down policymaking.

During the 1980s, community organization offered advocacy groups an opportunity to organize collectively against the oppressive structures of the state (Friedmann, 1987; Mayo, 1984; Panet-Raymond, 1989). In the 1990s, as interorganizational collaboration became more prevalent as an instrument of public policy, new conceptualizations of advocacy were developed based on community planning with stakeholder constituencies of community leaders and human service providers (Rothman, 1995; Dominelli, 1990; Pople, 1996; Weil & Gamble, 1995). For some practitioners, there has been a shift in the twenty-first century to electronic advocacy practice. Although some overlap occurs between the two methods, traditional and electronic, more exploration is needed to connect these approaches.

ADVOCACY AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Traditional models of advocacy practice in social work reflect a commitment to social activism. Social activism may be defined differentially and interchangeably as (1) community organizing, (2) community development, (3) community participation, (4) policy practice, and (5) social action. Typically, traditional advocacy practice includes diverse strategies such as demonstrations, boycotts, and symbolic acts such as mock elections and street theater, lobbying, grassroots action and political action committees (Haskett, 2002; Jansson, 2005). Traditional advocacy includes both *case advocacy* (advocating for services for an individual client or group of clients) and *cause advocacy* (social action strategies to effect policy and legislative change) (Hick & McNutt, 2002; Jansson, 2005). Advocacy practice includes the following social work skills:

1. getting issues on the public agenda;
2. social marketing;
3. policy-related research to influence decision-makers;
4. preparation of briefs and proposals; and
5. reforming internal program operations.

Advocacy for social justice has been the focus of social work researchers, practitioners and educators over the past few years. Scholars have identified clearly how social workers can approach advocacy in a systematic way that integrates advocacy practice into generalist practice (Ezell, 2001; Hoefler, 2006; Schneider & Lester, 2000). However, despite this recognition of the need for social workers to acquire traditional advocacy skills, there has been some resistance to the concept of electronic advocacy as an emerging practice modality. This paper challenges this resistance to using technological approaches to advocacy practice and suggests that technology will lead the way for social workers in the future to create virtual communities and strong social justice communities both local and global.

Recently, scholars have questioned how social work can continue to carry out advocacy strategies using traditional models (McNutt, 2006; McNutt & Hick, 2002). Most agree that the question is not *whether* electronic advocacy is needed but *how* students will learn how to use technology-based approaches (Frey & Faul, 2005).

ELECTRONIC ADVOCACY AS AN EMERGENT FORM OF PRACTICE

Recognizing the importance of technology-based approaches does not imply that social workers will discontinue their traditional advocacy practice. It does suggest, however, that most situations social workers will face in the future will require new knowledge and technological skills such as using social software to increase the electronic advocacy capabilities of nonprofit organizations. New technology has created the need for social workers to learn how to organize virtual communities, carry out electronic policy advocacy, use geographical information systems and other planning software, and provide leadership in the development of competencies in using the internet as a tool for social justice.

The potential of electronic advocacy in social work is becoming well known. Although it has not replaced traditional advocacy, growing acceptance indicates that electronic advocacy is a powerful tool for social change. Despite these promising developments, some resistance to e-advocacy remains among social work educators and practitioners (Dunlop, 2006; McNutt, 2006). Social workers confront unique problems when attempting either to make the shift from traditional to electronic advocacy or to integrate both these approaches. These problems include (1) the changing nature of e-advocacy, and (2) the lack of IT expertise needed to mix these two advocacy methods (McNutt, 2006).

Information technology is an emerging tool for producing social change at local, state, national, and international levels. Social workers must understand that a technology-based approach such as using social software or "free software" shifts them from their traditional advocacy paradigm. In spite of this, both methods offer strategies that are key tools for promoting social justice.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Changes in the information society have affected the way social workers practice. Consequently, social work educators must ensure that students learn new technology-based approaches to practice. This can happen only if social work educators themselves acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to support students as electronic advocates.

The terms “social software” and “free software” share some overlap, but emphasize different aspects of availability and freedom of use. Social software encompasses an Internet-enabled software that allows and encourages users to interact, collaborate, organize and share resources. It can include software owned by commercial interests as well as noncommercial offerings, but generally all social software programs are free for use. Free software can be examined, modified, distributed, and used without restriction. Free software has no monetary cost, but more important, it is free in the sense of freedom of use. Free software has different connotations in different technical communities; a popular and socially progressive definition is expressed by the Free Software Foundation (FSF).

Using social software in electronic advocacy practice includes the following free IT applications:

- blogs
- free email
- electronic mailing lists
- news groups
- photo-journalism
- word processing
- database management
- graphics editing tools
- financial management
- mapping tools
- reference tools/research tools.

As an example, with mapping tools such as Google Maps, it is now possible for agencies and practitioners to find user-friendly technology to graphically represent the demographics, service needs, resources, duplications, and service gaps that characterize specific geographical locations. The use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) mapping expands the avenues by which social work practitioners can design, implement, and evaluate programs (Hoefler, Hoefler, & Tobias, 1994). However, the provision of educational opportunities tailored to the needs of social work practitioners is necessary if the profession is to take full advantage of the potential of GIS.

Nonprofits deserve to have the most advanced and free technological applications. Social work students and practitioners need to develop their skills and integrate traditional and electronic advocacy practice. In doing so, they reduce the “digital divide” and help nonprofit organizations

promote equality for disadvantaged populations. Using e-advocacy skills to promote social justice demands that students and educators overcome their resistance to technology-based methods. Increasingly, the barriers to using information technology are based on human resistance, not the limits of technology. Overcoming this resistance will ensure that social workers expand the possibilities of promoting social justice in the twenty-first century.

SOCIAL SOFTWARE AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Information technology is an emerging tool for producing social change at local, state, national, and international levels. Social software is an important ally in the struggle for social justice. Social software and free software have created new parameters for electronic advocacy in social work. This software, which is readily available to nonprofit organizations, supports group communications, database management, web-based home page development, discussion groups, and other Internet-based communications. Social software has the ability to democratize information technology and build virtual communities among stakeholders who have a stake in social change.

Using social software to build networks allows social workers as advocates to spread information quickly and to organize supporters for social action across diverse geographical locations and issues. Social work practitioners, if educated in technology-based approaches to advocacy practice, could bring much-needed IT services to nonprofit organizations. Building the capacity of social work students to apply technology to advocacy practice benefits the student, the organization, and the population it serves.

Building digital democracy through free software that is user-friendly and accessible moves electronic advocacy into the realm of the possible for nonprofits. This social software is readily available to organizations that may not be able to afford commercial products or their copyright licenses. The challenge is not simply to identify the sites where this software may be accessed or downloaded but for social work practitioners to become experts in the use of this software. Organizations will need consultation and support to become proficient and autonomous in its use. We must remember that it is not enough to provide free software. We must also provide technical support to encourage and empower organizations to become technologically perceptive.

Building on this argument for technology-based approaches, the following review of available social software or free software provides an overview of the number of programs that nonprofits could use to move into the information age. Using this free software would strengthen both their advocacy practice and organizational capacity. Summaries of the following social software programs are presented: (1) blogs, (2) free e-mail, (3) electronic mailing lists, (4) news groups, (5) photojournalism, (6) word processing and spreadsheets, (7) database management, (8) graphics editing tools, (9) financial management, (10) mapping tools, (11) reference tools, (12) research tools, and (13) social networking tools and (14) social bookmarking. This section structures the discussion of social software into the following dimensions for each type of software: name of the software, a brief description of its function and purpose, and the URL where it may be accessed.

Blogs

Blog (or weblog) is a general term encompassing a variety of websites, ranging from online personal diaries to independent journalism sites. Blogs provide an online soapbox (one-way channel) and interactive forum (multiway conversation) for any person or group with Internet access. Blog sites frequently offer a comment system, allowing “visitors” to publish their own unmoderated opinions in the context of the blog postings.

Blog sites can be set up free of charge, through a variety of blogging services. Popular free blogging services include Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com/>) and LiveJournal (<http://www.livejournal.com/>).

Free E-mail

Free e-mail services are usually web-based, meaning that users visit their “inbox” using a web browser; the actual messages are stored elsewhere on a web server, rather than on the user’s personal computer. This enables access to e-mail from any Internet-enabled computer. In return for the free service, free e-mail companies expose users to advertising while they are viewing their e-mail.

Well-known services include Hotmail (<http://www.hotmail.com/>), Yahoo! Mail (<http://mail.hotmail.com/>) and Google Mail (<http://gmail.com/>).

Electronic Mailing Lists

Electronic mailing list is a more generic term for Listserv, which is a trademark name. Although a relatively old technology by Internet standards,

electronic mailing lists are still a popular form of communication. Listserv enables a member of a mailing-list to send a message to all list members without a moderator's intervention. List membership actions (such as subscribing to and unsubscribing from the list) are also automated.

Recently, there has been a blurring of the lines between electronic mailing lists and newsgroups; many modern discussion tools allow users to "visit" the discussion by e-mail, a web browser, or a newsreader.

Popular free discussion-group tools include Yahoo! Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com/>) and Google Groups (<http://groups.google.com/>). Groups may also choose to use mailing list software (such as Listserv, Majordomo or Mailman) on their own Internet servers.

News Groups

Predating the World Wide Web, the Usenet news system has been a constant source of online discussion for the past twenty years. Usenet has hosted numerous public discussion groups on a vast range of topics. According to Google Groups (a site that offers a web-based archive of Usenet), there are currently more than 54,000 discrete Usenet newsgroups.

As with e-mail, Usenet has no website of its own; however, most Usenet users tend to use web-based Usenet interfaces, such as Google Groups or Gmane (<http://gmane.org/>). These web-based systems also allow users to create their own discussion groups on new topics without the complications that once were required to create and propagate a Usenet group.

Photo Journalism

Numerous sites allow users to post photographs online, but the most popular currently is Flickr (<http://flickr.com/>). These sites make it simple to share photographs and short narratives with friends and colleagues as well as with the anonymous public. An interesting new service is Tabblo (<http://www.tabblo.com/>), which allows users to create photo presentations or posters rather than just collecting photos into a set or "stream" like Flickr.

Word Processing and Spreadsheets

Although tools such as WordPerfect and Microsoft Word are still tremendously popular in the workplace, their free equivalents have been catching up in popularity and overall quality. The most popular free office suite (including word processing, spreadsheets, presentation software, and

graphics editing) is OpenOffice.org (<http://openoffice.org>). It is no longer necessary for individuals and groups with few resources to pay license fees for (or, worse, acquire pirated copies of) expensive commercial packages to perform basic office tasks such as word processing.

An interesting new spin in the free word-processing market is GoogleDocs (<http://docs.google.com/>) formerly known as Writely (<http://www.writely.com/>). GoogleDocs is a free web-based word processor and spreadsheet that can be accessed from anywhere, and in which users can collaboratively edit a document at the same time.

Database Management

Free applications for managing data include user-friendly tools such as OpenOffice.org, which includes a database application similar to (though not as sophisticated as) Microsoft Access. Users can describe the “tables” in which to store their information, and can create reports and forms using simple graphical tools.

If data need to be shared among many users, or centralized for other purposes, numerous server-based database applications are available that tend to be less “user friendly” but are extremely powerful tools. Popular database management systems include MySQL (<http://www.mysql.com/>) and PostgreSQL (<http://postgresql.org/>).

Graphics Editing Tools

There are many free tools for editing graphics, including OpenOffice.org, Inkscape (<http://www.inkscape.org/>), and Xara Xtreme (<http://www.xaraxtreme.org/>). One of the best-known and feature-rich tools is GIMP, the GNU Image Manipulation Program (<http://www.gimp.org/>). Users interested in editing graphics with free software are encouraged to give many tools a try, since they each have very different approaches to graphics editing, and may not all be suitable for specific needs.

Financial Management

Currently, commercial financial management tools are still well ahead of their free-software counterparts. A few tools with some promise are usable now and should continue to grow in capabilities in the coming years. These include KMyMoney (<http://kmymoney2.sourceforge.net/>), a personal finance-management tool for the Linux operating system, and GnuCash (<http://www.gnucash.org/>), which is more geared toward small-business management and is available for Windows and Mac as well as Linux.

Mapping Tools

Google Maps (<http://maps.google.com/>) is by far the most popular and sophisticated online map service. Google Maps also provides a “map API”—a means by which web programmers can connect their own websites to Google’s mapping service, leading to a wide range of interesting “mashup” sites that combine Google’s maps with someone else’s information. For example, ChicagoCrime.org (<http://www.chicagocrime.org/>) overlays information on crimes in the Chicago area over Google’s mapping data.

Though free to use for individuals and free, with permission, for “mashups” such as ChicagoCrime.org, online mapping tools tend to come with licenses that prevent online maps from unrestricted use. For example, Google Maps forbids reprinting of maps for nonpersonal use.

Reference Tools

Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com/>), is a well-known example of an online referencing tool. However, there is debate about its usefulness among many professional librarians, suggesting that there may be flaws in the service. Online reference services are evolving rapidly and the reader is encouraged to discuss their merits with a professional librarian. An intriguing new library-related site is LibraryThing (<http://www.librarything.com/>) a site that advertises itself as the “world’s largest book club” and offers extensive information on books, reviews, and a very intelligent book recommendation service for popular and academic works.

Research Tools

Wikipedia (wikipedia.org) is a collaboratively written and edited encyclopedia. The Wikipedia Foundation also hosts Wiktionary (<http://www.wiktionary.org/>), a collaboratively-created dictionary.

Social Networking Software

Facebook and MySpace are social networking software. A user can set up a space within these systems and link to other’s spaces that are owned by the user’s friends, family, and colleagues. One can form networks with friends and family but indirectly, one also forms extended networks of friends of friends and friends of family. While these sites have been used more for interpersonal networking, it is possible for activist groups to use social networking sites to spread a message beyond the converted few to their friends, family, and friends of friends.

Social Bookmarking Services

Unalog (<http://www.unalog.com/>) or Del.icio.us (<http://del.icio.us/>), allow users to share their web-browser bookmarks with others, and sometimes add comments on one another's bookmark lists. Unalog is not only social software but is free to download and run on an organization's private servers.

OTHER ELECTRONIC ADVOCACY DEVELOPMENTS

Two more recent technology developments for social justice advocacy merit brief mention in this final section. YouTube is a useful channel for spreading messages. Users are accustomed to sharing interesting YouTube links and assisting in spreading messages of social justice and social action. This has proven to be an effective strategy for environmental activists as they are able to send dramatic and emotive videos of polar bears on shrinking icebergs and baby seals being clubbed by hunters. More recently, political candidates have used YouTube to get their message across to large numbers of voters in the United States. Michael Moore has used YouTube videos to promote racial justice in the United States through his campaign to supply African Americans with Day-Glo wallets that are easily recognizable as nonthreatening (that is, they are not weapons) by police in the United States.

The second recent development is the use of technology to organize "Smart Mobs" to promote human action for social justice. Using high-speed communications such as cell phones and text messaging, social groups are able to organize virtual communities at a greater speed than ever before. "Smart Mobs" as socially-motivated, virtually-organized "mobs" are able to respond to local conditions in an organized and highly responsive manner, thus promoting participatory democracy and rapid advocacy strategies at local levels.

This brief review of what is available as free software can alert practitioners to think about how these resources could be used to support non-profit organizations. This raises the question of why we still have a "digital divide" (Steyaert, 2002). As early as 1996, questions were being asked about how to prevent a division between the technological "haves" and "have nots". Research has shown that when small local organizations are deprived of information technology tools, they become increasingly

less effective compared with their better-resourced counterparts (Milio, 1996). Social software can widen the vision of nonprofits and provide a pathway to the use of technology-based approaches. In this paper, we argue that social workers can demonstrate how social software can be used in electronic advocacy. Other scholars, although not addressing the issue of free software directly, have identified technology-based approaches such as cyberadvocacy as an emerging specialty in social work macro practice (McNutt & Hick, 2002).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The digital divide is not just about access to information technology. A gap in knowledge exists among nonprofit organizations regarding how to use technology-based approaches to respond to social problems. In this century, social workers must capitalize on technological change and overcome their resistance to learning new information technology skills, changing from traditional to electronic advocacy practice, and integrating traditional and electronic advocacy practice.

Social work's traditional models of advocacy need to be re-engineered to meet the challenges to social justice that result from an increasingly divided global economy. There is a need for technologically competent social workers to organize virtual communities, carry out electronic policy advocacy, and provide leadership in the development of electronic advocacy practice.

The emergence of social software is an innovation that marries the seemingly disparate worlds of social work and information technology. Nonetheless, in the compressed world created by technology, professions such as medicine, law, social work, nursing, and education are linked with IT specialists. Technology specialists whose democratic principles echo social work values have developed social software or "free software." More important, both human and technological elements must work together to promote social change (McNutt & Hick, 2002). Collaboration between these IT specialists and social workers creates a synergy that produces innovative practices that can change the worlds of technology "have nots."

This discussion has focused on how social work students, educators, and practitioners can apply technology-based approaches to their work with disadvantaged populations. Resistance to learning new technology skills has been identified as a future problem. However, emerging literature

suggests social work students will receive more IT instruction and that cyberadvocacy practice will be the focus of curriculum development in the near future (Hick & McNutt, 2002). This paper has attempted to reinforce technology-based approaches by exploring the democratic promise of social software and its application to social work advocacy practice.

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