

# Youth social action: building a global latticework through information and communication technologies

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## SUMMARY

*New technologies and a growing global consciousness have created innovative opportunities for young people to connect locally, nationally and internationally for social action. This paper describes the dynamics of collective action in this new environment. Particular attention is given to how youth social action initiatives use information and communication technologies (ICT) to foster connection, action and sustainability. In-depth interviews were performed with five youths (aged 18–24 years) and two youth workers at two international non-government organizations*

*(NGOs) focusing on social justice and human rights: Global Youth Connect and Amnesty International Canada. Qualitative methods were used to code and analyze the interview tapes and notes. Three main results are discussed: (i) the role of connection in building a youth action movement; (ii) the differential use of various communication technologies; and (iii) access barriers to connection opportunities. ICT enables new and expanded ways of connecting youth to express and share their experiences, which is a key success factor for social action initiatives.*

*Key words:* community participation; information and communication technologies (ICT); social action; youth

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## INTRODUCTION

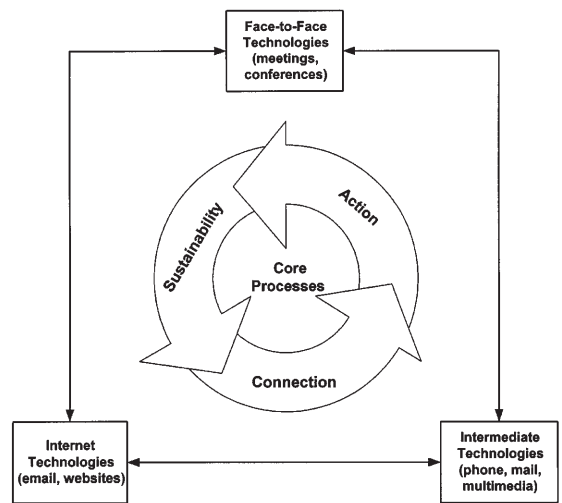
Today's youth are coming of age in a complex world impacted by global forces. However, they generally feel disenfranchised from socio-political processes (Cloonan and Street, 1998; Innovative Centre for Community and Youth Development, 2001). Youths may turn to social action to speak out and effect change in relation to issues touching their lives. The challenge is to find ways of engaging and empowering young people in community participation and social change. In their report entitled *Youth as Effective Citizens*, the International Youth Foundation underscores the need 'to pause and ask young people what they need to make a difference and strengthen the example and evidence base of what exists' [(Pittman *et al.*, 2000), p. 29].

What roles can information and communication technologies (ICT) play? The Internet, in particular, enables youth to connect locally, nationally and internationally in unparalleled ways. Young people are usually the early adopters of new technologies (Taylor *et al.*, 2001). Youth often prefer to make themselves heard through popular culture like music, videos and websites (Cloonan and Street, 1998). Interactive multimedia environments are youth-friendly spaces, offering young people the ability to create and publish their own work (Greenaway, 2001). Communication technologies can open up opportunities for dialogue and exchange among diverse communities, giving youth access to different networks, perspectives and experiences.

In theorizing modern social action, Fisher argues that: ‘we must now view community-based social action beyond our national borders, as a global phenomenon’ [(Fisher, 1997), p. 54]. Given new information systems and media coverage, acts of local resistance can now take on much larger, cross-territorial dimensions and effects (Bleiker, 2000). Modern technologies support community consciousness-raising, honouring the goals of forerunners like Saul Alinsky, by providing opportunities for citizens to explore and understand the shared nature of their concerns (Uhler Cart, 1997). Within this connected environment, contemporary social action has been described as ‘an expanding latticework covering the globe’ [(Durning, 1989), pp. 6–7].

Youth social action exemplifies the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion’s directives to develop personal skills, create supportive environments, strengthen community action and build healthy public policy [World Health Organization (WHO), 1986]. Initiatives that focus on youth-driven social action help young people achieve Blum’s ‘4Cs’ of healthy youth development (Blum, 1988): (i) *competence* in areas such as literacy and interpersonal skills; (ii) *connection* to others through caring relationships; (iii) *character-building* through the promotion of values such as individual responsibility and community service; and (iv) *confidence-building* that fosters hope and a sense of success in setting and meeting goals. Youth action initiatives lead to the creation of supportive environments for youth involvement. They provide opportunities for youths to put their skills into action, and they position young people as valued and necessary community members. The resulting action can support social change in the form of healthy public policy.

The present study examines the use of ICT for social action through case studies of two youth organizations. The aim is to examine how these organizations foster youth connection, action and sustainability, and the roles that different technologies play in social action. A broad definition of technology is used, extending from new Internet-based technologies to ‘older’ options such as the telephone, artistic media and face-to-face connection. Figure 1 is a conceptual model that guides our research. It illustrates our broad definition of technology, along with the three central processes under investigation: connection, action and sustainability.



**Fig. 1:** A model depicting core processes and technologies that support youth social action.

## METHODS

A qualitative case-study approach was selected in order to provide rich, in-depth data, given the exploratory nature of the study (Yin, 1989). Semi-structured interviews (Robson, 1993) were conducted with youths and youth workers at two non-governmental agencies devoted to youth social action. Interviews were performed with at least one youth worker and two youths at each organization, in order to ensure a variety of perspectives through triangulation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Before the interview began, subjects were given a short questionnaire asking closed-ended questions about technology use and demographic information.

Open-ended interview questions were developed using themes from the conceptual model (Figure 1). Questions were divided into three main areas of investigation: connection opportunities, strategies for action and keys to sustainability. Within each area, participants were asked to reflect on the role of three different levels of technology: face-to-face technologies (meetings, conferences); intermediate technologies (phone, mail, multimedia); and Internet technologies (e-mail, websites). This broad definition of technology was thought to reflect the spectrum of the organization’s experience. At the beginning of the interview, participants were also asked how long they had

been involved in the organization, why they had become involved and why they had stayed involved. Interviews lasted an average of 1 h and were tape-recorded. To allow each participant the opportunity to prepare, participants were provided with the interview questions beforehand. Wording of the interview questions was tested before the research began with two youths who were not part of the research.

### Site selection

An online review was undertaken of youth agencies and programmes devoted to social justice and human rights that have some form of Internet-based content (e.g. a website or listserv). Six potential organizations were identified and approached via e-mail about their interest and ability to be involved in the research. Two organizations were selected because they were the first to respond and agree to participate. The two organizations are described below, in order to allow the readers to make their own judgement as to the applicability of the research to other organizations and/or situations.

#### 1. Amnesty International Canada's Youth and Student Programme

This is the official youth structure of the Canadian wing of Amnesty International (AI). Currently, the Youth and Student Programme supports ~330 Amnesty youth groups throughout Canada, two thirds of which are at the high school level. Other AI youth groups are affiliated with a university, college, connected to a place of worship or based in a community. An international NGO, AI has country-based satellite offices throughout the world. Although the organization has been in operation since the 1960s, AI Canada's Youth and Student Programme was started in 1987. AI is involved in lobbying actions against human rights abuses, advocacy on the part of prisoners of conscience, and awareness raising around human rights issues. Every year AI selects an issue or country-specific campaign. Their current campaign centres on the elimination of all forms of torture (for more information visit <http://www.amnesty.ca>).

#### 2. Global Youth Connect

Global Youth Connect (GYC) is a youth-driven NGO that supports community-based activists from countries around the world. GYC's purpose is to bring committed youth together to support

young people from diverse nations who are working for human rights and social justice. The initial conceptualization for GYC began in 1997 by a group of dedicated young people and a few adult allies. Today GYC is run by a staff and board of directors composed entirely of young people under the age of 30 years. GYC currently supports a core group of ~20 young activists from various countries, including Yugoslavia, Guatemala, Nigeria and the United States. GYC activities include 'learning communities', in which youth activists are brought together to share knowledge and experiences, and to raise awareness of their work. GYC also runs an e-mail listserv, with >1500 subscribers, through which information is disseminated about international human rights conferences, training programs and workshops. GYC's most recent project placed a group of youth in Bhutanese refugee camps, where they stayed with local families and used various media (poetry, photography, video, etc.) to document their experiences (for more information visit <http://www.globalyouthconnect.org>).

### Research participants

Contact persons at each site were asked to identify one potential youth worker and two or three potential youth participants. Youths were defined as being 15–24 years of age, according to the guidelines provided by the United Nations Division for Policy and Social Development (United Nations, 2002). Both contact persons were interviewed as youth workers. Suggested youth participants were approached by the study researcher via e-mail. All youths who agreed to participate were interviewed.

Two youths and one youth worker were interviewed from Amnesty International Canada, and three youths and one youth worker were interviewed from Global Youth Connect. Youth participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 years, and comprised two males and three females. Access to younger youth proved to be difficult, as youth workers were unwilling to give out contact information for young people under the age of 18 years. The two youth workers were not asked to disclose their age and both were female. Participants were residents of North America and Jamaica. Cultural groups with which the participants identified were Central and South American, North American, Oceanian, European and Caribbean.

## Data analyses

Interview tapes were reviewed and notes were made from the recorded material. Notes made while listening to the recorded tapes were consistent with notes taken during the interview. Interview notes were coded for major themes (Strauss, 1987). The preliminary coding framework consisted of sorting the data into three main themes from the conceptual model (Figure 1): connection, action and sustainability. Subthemes were identified and core learnings were drawn by clustering related themes together [(Robson, 1993), p. 401]. Results were checked with the research participants to ensure that interpretations were accurate and meaningful (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The most compelling results, based on the determination of the researchers and feedback from the participants, are discussed below.

## RESULTS

### The role of connection in building a youth action movement

Both organizations identified that their main function was to connect youth to one another in order to engage them in social action and support them in their action initiatives. Bringing people together, online and in person, was central to the work of both organizations. Online connection

took place via websites and listservs. Face-to-face connection was realized through educational events, known as ‘human rights colleges’ or ‘learning communities’, that centred on skill-building and interpersonal exchange, and were carried out in a conference-like setting. By connecting to one another online and in person, there was a notion of creating a youth action movement. Participants described a feeling of ‘strength in numbers’, a common space in which they felt comfortable and supported in their activist work. Table 1 outlines key themes that relate to the role of connection in building a youth action movement.

Many participants identified the need to view connection as a form of action. There was a strong understanding that skill-building, awareness-raising, interpersonal exchange and mutual empowerment need to be seen as human rights work. One participant stated that ‘it’s not just the moment you write the letter or call your MP or what have you. It’s funny how it’s a bit of a struggle to get people to see that’.

The ability to draw on a large number of resources via connection with individuals with similar experiences and relevant knowledge was key. Experiential knowledge, ‘information and wisdom gained from lived experience’ [(Schubert and Borkman, 1994), p. 228], was highlighted as the central and most valued shared resource. Less tangibly, the notion of solidarity, of feeling

**Table 1:** Building a youth action movement

Key themes	
Feeling part of a bigger whole	‘The more important side for me is just the solidarity. The sense that we’re not all alone in this work, and that there are other people facing the same challenges, but that there is some larger picture that we are fitting into’
Experiential learning and capacity building	‘It was about people expressing and sharing with others what their experience has been, and learning from each other, and creating a new strength and a new body of knowledge from that shared experience’
Skill building as a form of activism	‘We’re trying to get people to recognize that just getting out there and raising awareness and building this understanding, and also trying to figure out how to build activism into your life. That’s all human rights work’
Understanding activism as a lived experience	‘We’re about people, and not about issues. We work to support individuals in a holistic way; that focuses on not just their activism, but what drives them as people, that feeds into their activism, or prevents them from being active’
Mutual empowerment	‘After the workshop, trust me, I was very empowered to continue my work as a human rights activist. I don’t know how to describe it. Just feeling very empowered where you’ve got all this information ... I can’t keep it, I need to pass it on’
Support and sustainability	‘To come out and go home feeling energized and supported and more able to take on the activities and do the work they are trying to do’

part of a bigger whole, was very important. Being able to see a bigger picture by learning what others were doing helped to buffer the feelings of disempowerment and disconnection that many participants had experienced. The role of connection in re-energizing and sustaining one's commitment by getting reinforcement, support and new information was also highlighted.

A further important theme was an understanding of the lived experience of activism: the recognition that activist work is grounded within the lives and realities of young people. The need to see activists as people first was highlighted, along with the recognition that youth need tools and support in order to build activist work into their lives. One participant described a notion of youth for youth activism: 'what makes the work that I'm involved in particularly appealing is that we're young people doing work for other young people; there is something about that youth for youth work that feels great, that feels natural to me'.

Responses from youth and youth workers were very similar. This could be due to the fact that both organizations were focused on being action-oriented and youth-centred, resulting in little difference between the experiences of youth and youth workers within each organization. Young people were empowered into leadership positions and youth workers strived to be youth-friendly and inclusive. One level of difference did

exist, however, when participants were asked why they became involved in human rights work. Many youths focused on issues of privilege, and on working for other young people who are silenced, who are living and working in oppressive conditions. The feeling of 'that could be me' seemed to be a strong motivator. Youth workers identified a consistent desire to be part of policy initiatives, yet felt dissatisfied with traditional alternatives, such as government. The notion of human rights work and NGOs as an alternate option to policy development was highlighted.

### Differential use of information and communication technologies

A common point of discussion among all participants was the need to use a variety of communication strategies in virtually all programming. Tables 2 and 3 describe the roles of different communication technologies and the strengths/weaknesses of the various options. Emphasis was on the fact that different options work for different people and in different circumstances—one size does not fit all! This eclectic use was summarized by one participant: 'E-mail is still heavily (biased) towards the text-based learners and not everyone is. So we toss in the phone calls because that's just a better setting for some people, just like the in-person setting builds a lot

**Table 2:** Roles of different communication technologies

Technology	Role
Face-to-face (workshops, conferences)	Education and awareness-raising Training and skill-building Relationship building
E-mail (individual, listserv)	Keeping in touch between face-to-face meetings Disseminating information Petitions and direct actions
Mail (flyers, newsletters)	Education and awareness-raising Disseminating information and campaign materials
Telephone (individual or conference calls)	Supplement to e-mail Personable way of touching base Overcoming e-mail access barriers
Internet (discussion boards, websites)	Petitions and direct actions Education and awareness-raising Sharing experiences and stories 'How-to' guides
Multimedia (photography, video, art, poetry)	Awareness-raising via storytelling Connecting on an emotional level Strengthening the human impact of messages

**Table 3:** Strengths and weaknesses of different communication technologies

Technology	Strengths	Weaknesses
Face-to-face (workshops, conferences)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most preferred form of interaction</li> <li>• Engaging and interpersonal</li> <li>• Promotes a sense of belonging and empowerment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires planning and support</li> <li>• Demands time and commitment from participants</li> <li>• Expense limits access</li> </ul>
E-mail (individual, listserv)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most commonly used communication tool</li> <li>• Can be quick and easy to use</li> <li>• Good for detail-oriented tasks and checklists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires online access</li> <li>• Geared towards text-based learners</li> <li>• Level of engagement depends on online social skills</li> </ul>
Mail (flyers, newsletters)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Infrastructure widely available and used</li> <li>• Easy distribution of formatted material</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires significant planning and time</li> <li>• May be inefficient if there is no specific recipient</li> </ul>
Telephone (individual, conference calls)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows for real-time give and take</li> <li>• Accommodates non-text-based learners</li> <li>• Social skills required are more generic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult coordination across different schedules and time zones</li> <li>• Time intensive</li> <li>• Often expensive</li> </ul>
Internet (discussion boards, websites)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to a wide range of individuals, experiences and information</li> <li>• Fun and engaging</li> <li>• Online actions are quick and easy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires online access</li> <li>• Online actions often perceived as less effective</li> <li>• Filters block access to information</li> </ul>
Multimedia (photography, video, art, poetry)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly engaging on a very emotional level</li> <li>• Allows for creativity and a range of expressions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Detailed processes and example base do not yet exist</li> <li>• Can require expensive equipment</li> </ul>

of confidence, and I think that's the key part of things'.

It was universally acknowledged that face-to-face options were the most effective and preferred forms of connection. Face-to-face options were highlighted as being more participatory, more able to foster real give and take, and more likely to build long-lasting relationships. Despite this preference for in-person communication, e-mail was identified as the most common form of communication. All participants used e-mail daily, and most used the Internet daily as well. E-mail was regularly used for planning, disseminating information and keeping in touch between face-to-face meetings. One participant acknowledged that: 'a lot of things would not be possible without (the Internet)'. Telephone calls also emerged as an important option that could not be replaced by e-mail. The interaction available via the telephone, the opportunity to ask questions and get immediate responses, and the chance to touch base and open up a forum for dialogue were important features of telephone connections, particularly for conference calls. Regular mail, although used with increasingly less frequency, remains an important tool for sending large amounts of formatted material. Difficulties sending graphic-intensive files via e-mail were

cited as reasons for continuing to use mail-out options.

Both organizations had experience with online lobbying tools (e.g. e-mail petitions or letters). One organization used an automated service in which registered users would receive urgent actions via e-mail. By clicking on the action they would be taken to a website which would tailor their response and send it out to the appropriate political representative. Although the ease of online options was highlighted, many participants were wary of the effectiveness of online lobbying tools. Online tools were often described as 'too easy', and were viewed as not having the same meaning as written alternatives. The intangibility of e-mail was highlighted. There were concerns about the fact that e-mail does not pass through as many hands as regular mail, that e-mail petitions do not pile up, and that they can be easily dismissed and erased by the recipient.

There is growing use of creative and artistic media such as photography, music, drama and video. Creative media was seen to be an emotional and engaging way to involve people in human rights work. According to one participant: 'movies and pictures are just a nice way to present information to people who are fairly new to human rights, so they're more receptive to it that way ...

**Table 4:** Access barriers

Key themes	
Internet access	'I think (the fact) that people found out about us (means that) they are at least connected to some network and that usually means they are connected to some computer in some way or another'
Funding	'A lot of the work we can do is intangible in a way that doesn't lend itself to fundraising. Connections work, how do you point to outcomes of that? A lot of foundations or individuals will want to support young activists directly, rather than supporting community building among those activists'
Language	'It's still true that English is a lot of the working language, and we are not quite over that hurdle'
Authentic youth involvement	'It's really important, because I think often youth programming really focuses on those more immediately capable youth who, forgive me for saying this, are the little adults. Organizations tend to gravitate towards them because those look like familiar people. You don't have to change your organization as much to involve those youth'

you show a movie, you show what (refugee) camps look like, what people do on a daily basis, it attracts more, it makes it more close to you, you understand what's going on a lot more'.

### Access barriers

Access to connection opportunities was highlighted as the main barrier to the successful establishment of a global youth social action network. Table 4 illustrates four key determinants that influence access to connection opportunities: (i) Internet connection; (ii) funding; (iii) language; and (iv) authentic structures for youth involvement. Online access was essential in order to become involved and to stay involved. All participants had some level of online connection, and it was acknowledged that by virtue of being involved they already had to have been online. Even face-to-face options were largely advertised online via websites or listservs. Financial barriers also limited access to connection opportunities. The need for devoted funds for youth programmes was highlighted, given the high costs of Internet and telephone connections, and financial barriers in relation to travel, both worldwide and nationally. In addition, the difficulty in gaining funds for connection work was discussed, given the 'intangibility' of the work, and the common inability to point to direct outcomes and results. Language was a further structural barrier to involvement in youth action networks. It was acknowledged that working internationally requires a considerable level of English fluency. The need to restructure processes and organizations to be more youth-centred and inclusive

was also highlighted, in order to involve young people with diverse life situations, skills and experience.

### DISCUSSION

Information and communication technologies can bring individuals into a collective that helps to inspire, support and sustain their activism. As one participant describes, 'part of what sustains people is being able to connect and take action and get feedback on that, and work with others and brainstorm, and all of that spins around and around'.

The dialectic relationship between connection, action and sustainability is reflected in Figure 1. Connection offers community to young activists and allows them to feel part of a strengthened whole, in which all members can draw on one another. This connection helps to sustain youth action endeavours by overcoming the powerlessness youth often feel in relation to the enormity of social justice issues, and by creating the sense of being an integral spoke in a larger (global) wheel. In the words of one youth activist, 'we are part of a community of human rights activists, while we are picking off our individual pieces, our causes are shared'. On a large scale, this collective is translated into activism (e.g. the environmental movement) with the visibility to empower new members and the ability to alter public policy and consciousness.

It is no accident that increased calls for youth action are coming now within the discourse related to our 'global village'. But while such movement

building is facilitated by Internet-based connectivity, it is grounded in the place and relevance of social action within the individual's life and experiences. By focusing on concepts like individual learning styles and the strengths of dialogue and interaction, participants in our study emphasize the person behind the technology. The 'true' communication technology becomes the interpersonal interaction between individuals; the hardware of that interaction simply serves to mediate that connection. This important point often gets lost in the glow of new technologies.

As Sherry Turkle describes, 'It is sobering that the personal computer revolution, once conceptualised as a tool to rebuild community, now tends to concentrate on building community inside a machine' [(Turkle, 1996), p. 57]. The groups and individuals profiled in our study are working hard to avert building community inside a machine. The focus is on seeing participants as people first, and on fostering connection on that level by concentrating on relationships, personalities and emotional connection.

Youth social action networks can be viewed as a form of social capital, defined as the 'relationships, networks and norms that facilitate collective action' [(Isuma, 2001), p. 6]. The focus is on building capacity, understanding and empowerment from the inside out. This is accomplished by bringing youth together to tell their stories, build on their experiences and learn from one another's struggles. Social action networks position community members as integral resources, as opposed to 'problems' in need of fixing (Milio, 1996). Connection helps to 'broaden the participants' sense of self, developing the 'I' into 'we' ... enhancing the participants 'taste' for collective benefits' [(Putnam, 1995), p. 67].

Unfortunately, access to connection opportunities remains largely centred in privileged communities (Edejer, 2000). The barriers described in Table 4 illustrate different levels of privilege that limit membership in youth social action networks. Opportunities are largely provided for those who have digital access and who have the freedom, life skills and experience to work within existing structures. Even when opportunities are available, resources are scarce. There is a need to develop sustainable youth-friendly models for social action that draw on the power and potential of ICT. Special attention must be paid towards developing processes for involving disadvantaged and marginalized youth. It is important that voice and opportunity be provided

to diverse groups to ensure that social action networks do not end up reinforcing existing hierarchies, rather than breaking them down.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan has described communications technology as 'a great democratizing power waiting to be harnessed to our global struggle for peace and development' (United Nations, 1998). The participants in our study reaffirm the potential and desire to use ICT to build identity and connection among diverse youth. Social action networks offer great promise for giving direction to change in building a civil society. The potential cannot be met, however, until the world's diverse communities are able to tap into the dialogue. Global access to a broad network of information and communication technologies is an integral part of the solution. To this end, further research into, policy analysis of, and advocacy for the opportunities and barriers for achieving global access to ICT are needed.

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