Grey Literature and Development:
The Non-Governmental Organization in Action

Lynne Marie Rudasill, University of Illinois, United States

Abstract

Traditionally, the non-governmental organization working in the area of development has been viewed as a trusted source for research and information on specific topics and populations. With the advent of the World Wide Web, many of these organizations are working to make their expertise available to a large number of users. This preliminary study surveys non-governmental organizations working in several areas of health-related activity to ascertain what types of information they are making available on the Web. What types of grey literature are being made available electronically by these organizations? What resources are being used to disseminate this literature? In addition to reviewing the types of information extant on these sites, we will compare a sample of the contents of the websites to the WorldCat database to see what is, and is not, part of the traditional dissemination system.

This preliminary study is part of a larger survey that looks at the electronic production, collection, and dissemination of information by non-governmental organizations in developing and developed nations. Resources such as press/news releases, reports, books, bulletins, and journals are calculated for each organization at individual websites.

It is expected that the World Wide Web now serves the purpose of the traditional vertical file in which print copies of non-governmental organization materials used to be placed. It is also assumed that the materials on the Web serve only as the tip of the iceberg as far as the production of information by the non-governmental organization. The impact this might have on the organization's ability to serve as a point of expertise in policy decisions is explored.

Introduction

The growth of the non-governmental organization (NGO) as an actor in the policy and information arena has been rapid over the course of the last century and a half. At the time the United Nations was chartered, forty-four NGOs were recognized as consultative organizations with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Currently over 1600 NGOs are associated with the U.N. Department of Public Information and ECOSOC.[1] The NGOs are regularly consulted about areas related to their work by various agencies of the United Nations for several reasons. These civil society organizations are often recognized for their expertise in the topical areas in which they work. They are the groups that are "on the ground" with the problems they address and they usually have a deep understanding of the causes and solutions to these problems. Although these organizations are generally recognized as representing a variety of societal problems that need to be addressed, they usually have few, if any, apparent ties to either commerce or government that might influence their fact-finding. This provides the organization with a high degree of credibility in their respective areas. These organizations also have very effective networks. Frequently the NGO has to engage in public relations, advocacy, and rationale for funding support. This type of outreach creates many channels for the sharing of ideas and information and also supports the accountability for the organization in the eyes of others.

One of the ways the NGO can achieve this networking is to support a web site. The web site serves many purposes reaching out to the target population, the press, the government, and the donor.[2] The sites are as varied as the organizations, and the richness of the website is tied to the support the organization enjoys. The sites also are somewhat representative of the digital divide because in developing nations the expense of hosting for a site, as well as the price for the expertise needed to maintain a site, is often higher than the organization can afford. In related research including the exploration of various directories for NGOs, we have found that the percentage of organizations with a web presence is much greater in the developed nation. But what does this mean in the creation and capture of grey literature by any of these organizations?

A wide variety of literature is available concerning the NGO and information dissemination. A large part of the writing revolves around how NGOs use and disseminate information and the difficulties they encounter in fulfilling the target audience needs in a timely and efficient manner.[3] One of the most useful advances in the collection of grey literature by non-profit or non-governmental organizations is the *Grey Literature Report* of the New York Academy of Medicine.[4] This particular resource is specifically targeted