National Research
Council Canada

Conseil national
de recherches Canada

Institute for
Information Technology

Institut de technologie
de l'information

NRC·CNRC

*Sustaining an Online Information Network for Non-Profit Organisations: The Case of Community Exchange ***

O'Donnell, S., and Ramaioli, G.
September 2004

Canada

Sustaining an Online Information Network for Non-Profit Organisations: The Case of Community Exchange

Susan O'Donnell
National Research Council of Canada
Susan.O'Donnell@nrc-cnrc.gc.ca

Giancarlo Ramaioli
Hyperlink – Ireland
gian@hyperlink.ie

Abstract - *Community Exchange (CE) is the most successful online information network for the non-profit sector in Ireland. CE is also an online counter-public sphere, a space where alternative messages can be produced and exchanged outside the mainstream media and public sphere. CE emerged within specific Irish research, policy and practice contexts. It consists of a free-to-users email bulletin and website containing news and information produced by and for the community and voluntary sector. Since its modest beginnings in October 1999, CE has grown to include more than 3,600 subscribers in the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, primarily staff and volunteers from non-profit organisations. This paper contributes practical experiences from Ireland about an online community information network for the non-profit sector, including a discussion of its sustainability. The results of a recent survey of CE subscribers demonstrated strong support for CE and a resistance to introducing commercial advertising or paid subscriptions, highlighting the challenge to sustainability. The case study of CE suggests that an online counter-public sphere can be sustained in Ireland with the ongoing contribution of considerable volunteer resources. The study suggests that financial sustainability is the biggest single challenge for the sustainability of a counter-public sphere.*

Introduction

Non-profit organisations include all community, voluntary and non-governmental organisations that have a brief to improve society or the situation of specific social groups they work with or represent. During the past decade, a large body of research on non-

1

profits has highlighted how these organisations contribute to effective social, economic and political systems. Italian theorist Alberto Melucci (1996) has explored how non-profit organisations within social movements create independent public spaces to articulate to the rest of society the themes they consider important. These independent spaces also function to enable mainstream political actors to receive alternative messages more clearly. The messages produced in these spaces have the symbolic function of challenging the dominant codes in society and creating an opportunity for alternative discourse.

Melucci's work is significant in the context of the public sphere. Theories of the public sphere, a normative concept popularised by the work of Jurgen Habermas (1989[1962]), are central to understanding how the public forms opinions and how the media determine news agendas in liberal democracies. The public sphere is conceived as the realm of social life in which citizens form opinions through conversations. Habermas' original vision of the public sphere has been fundamentally challenged by critics, who argued that it is a mechanism for exclusion and silencing of certain social groups (Negt and Kluge, 1993[1972]; Nancy Fraser, 1992). In this context, non-profit organisations are creating multiple or parallel public spheres to create and disseminate their alternative messages that challenge the discourse of the mainstream public sphere.

The early research exploring the link between non-profits, the public sphere, and the internet has been largely optimistic. For example, McChesney (1996) argued that if the internet could be wrested from commercial control and put into the hands of citizens' organisations, a 21st century public sphere would flower, with informed interactive debate independent of commercial or government control.

A study in Ireland found that non-profit organisations use the internet in a way that reflects their relations with the public sphere (O'Donnell, 2001a). Irish women's (non-profit) organisations used the internet to create an alternative or parallel public sphere for organising and engagement outside the mainstream public sphere, which they perceived as not sympathetic to or informed about women's issues. The research underlined the

2

limits of internet communications in the context of the public sphere: participants were constrained from expressing themselves freely online because of their organisational affiliations and the perceived culture of silence on political issues in Ireland related to the "troubles" in Northern Ireland.

Recent research in this area has focused on developing the concept of the "counter-public" sphere in which radical groups across the political spectrum use the internet to advance their political agendas. Downey and Fenton (2003) argue that the role of NGOs and other citizen groups is increasingly important and the task of analyzing counter-public spheres is of particular relevance today. Online communication and information processes generated by non-profit organisations can generate new forms of fragmentation and solidarity. In order to understand how messages from counter-public spheres break through into the mainstream, researchers need to better understand how (non-profit) organisations create and maintain these alternative public spheres.

The counter-public sphere is the context for this case study of Community Exchange (CE), an online information network for the Irish non-profit sector. The central question addressed by this case study is: Can an online counter-public sphere created by and for the non-profit sector be sustained in Ireland?

Irish Non-Profit Organisations and the Internet

Community Exchange emerged within the specific research, policy and practice contexts in Ireland during the 1990s. Ireland currently has a population of four million, with another 1.5 million in Northern Ireland. Both political jurisdictions have a vibrant non-profit sector, including national representative and umbrella organisations in the urban centers and small community and voluntary organisations in all the urban and rural areas.

Research on Irish non-profit organisations and the Internet

The research context in which CE evolved was a national research project in Ireland conducted from 1995 to 1998 - the most comprehensive study to date of Irish non-profit organisations and the internet. The project, the Voluntary Sector in the Information Age, was conducted from 1995 to 1998 by Dublin City University (DCU) and the Dublin Inner-City Partnership (DICP). The research investigated the use of computers and the internet by Irish community and voluntary organisations. The project also advocated national policy development to support the use of ICT by non-profits in Ireland. Reports and articles from the project highlighted three themes (O'Donnell, 1996; Ennals, 1997; Trench and O'Donnell, 1997; O'Donnell, Trench and Ennals, 1998; O'Donnell and Trench, 1999):

1. There was considerable potential for non-profit organisations in Ireland to use the internet for information-sharing, networking, activism, and expanding their work on behalf of marginalised groups in Ireland.

2. Non-profit organisations in Ireland were interested to use the internet effectively for these purposes but lacked the awareness, knowledge, skills and resources to do so. One of the main limitations was lack of funding for computer hardware, software, training, and ongoing maintenance and support.

3. Funding for non-profit organisations to develop capacity with ICT was extremely limited and there were no plans to develop policies or programs to improve this situation.

4. Aside from funding, many non-profit organisations needed a compelling reason to use the internet; they could not see how it would add value to their operations.

Since the DCU-DICP research was completed in 1998, there has been little further research on Irish non-profits and ICT. The exception is the analysis of the community-building aspects of ICT in the Ennis Information Age Town that highlighted the innovative ways that community and voluntary organisations in the town and surrounding

region could use ICT if they had the resources to develop these initiatives (McQuillan, 2001 and 2003).

Policy and funding to increase Internet use by Irish non-profits

Community Exchange began its operation within the context of ongoing lack of policy and funding for ICT use by Irish non-profits. The Irish government began to develop information society policy in 1995. From then until the end of that decade, the DCU-DICP research team made several policy submissions and public interventions to highlight the importance of government support for ICT use by non-profit organisations. Until the end of the 1990s, however, Irish information society policy did not recognise this issue. Non-profit organisations had almost no avenues of public funding to increase their capacity to use ICT.

The policy situation changed somewhat after the link was made between the digital divide in Ireland and ICT use by Irish non-profits. In particular, a report of European research on the role of voluntary organisations in fostering a more inclusive information society in Europe (O'Donnell, 2001b) was cited in key Irish information policy documents as the rationale for developing funding programs for the community and voluntary sector. The current information society policy, *New Connections*, was published in 2002, with progress reports in 2003 and 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2002, 2003, and 2004). In each of these documents, the Irish government recognised the role of Irish non-profits in increasing inclusion in the information society and their need to develop ICT capacity.

However the recognition of this issue in national policy did not translate into new funding opportunities for Irish non-profits. From 2001 to 2003, the Irish government did support the CAIT Initiative (Community Application of Information Technology), which funded 121 community-led projects aimed at engaging late adopters of new technologies. Most of these projects involved community and voluntary organisations delivering ICT skills

training to people in their communities. The CAIT funding was used by a limited number of Irish non-profits to increase their ICT capacity for the duration of the project.

In 2003, a major review of e-inclusion policy in Ireland again recommended funding that Irish non-profits could access to increase their capacity to use ICT (O'Donnell, McQuillan and Malina, 2003). However at the time of writing, the Irish government has no plan to develop policy and funding for this purpose.

Internet initiatives by and for Irish non-profits

Community Exchange developed within the context of the low level of innovative internet use by Irish non-profits during the 1990s. During that decade, there were very few examples of Irish non-profits using the internet for anything other than email and a basic website. This situation was directly related to non-profits' low capacity to use ICT that had been highlighted in the DCU-DICP research project and the lack of public funding and support to improve this situation.

Since the 1990s, many Irish non-profit organisations have been developing their websites and their capacity to use email and online information processes. The most complete listing of these organisations' websites is available on the Irish Links website - the first and only directory on the Web that lists Irish non-profit organisations using the internet. Irish Links was developed and is maintained by Activelink, the organisation that also maintains Community Exchange. Aside from website development, there are few examples of innovative use of ICT by non-profits in Ireland or even notable attempts to encourage innovation and capacity-building in the sector.

One factor that may explain this situation is that in Ireland – unlike in most other countries in Europe – there is no national umbrella body, formal association or membership organisation which represents or advocates on behalf of the sector as a whole. Although various umbrella networks and organisations exist for specific sub-sectors – such as environmental and development organisations, women's organisations

and so on – there is no overarching development or support structure to assist the tens of thousands of Irish non-profits in their attempts to use ICT effectively.

Community Exchange (CE)

Genesis and development of CE

Community Exchange (CE) was conceived by its founders as a means to increase ICT capacity and internet use by Irish non-profit organisations. The first meeting to develop CE was called in mid-1999 in response to: the ICT challenge faced by non-profits identified in the DCU-DICP research, the continued lack of government funding and support to assist non-profits to increase their capacity to use ICT, and the lack of other initiatives in Ireland to increase ICT use by non-profits.

At that first meeting, the main issue discussed was the need for Irish non-profits to see the practical benefit of the internet. An online news and information network for the non-profit sector was identified as an important contribution that could meet the needs of non-profit organisations. The meeting sketched the plan for the Community Exchange email bulletin.

A decision was made on two key elements: Community Exchange would be an all-Ireland venture linking non-profits in both political jurisdictions on the island of Ireland (the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, which is part of the UK); and Community Exchange would feature prominently the email addresses and Web URLs (instead of phone numbers and postal addresses) of non-profits, so that non-profits subscribing to CE would be encouraged to use the internet to communicate with each other.

The CE founders did their CE work voluntarily as staff members of organisations working with the non-profit sector. They were united in their belief that non-profits could use the internet to improve their work aimed at bringing about a positive change in society. CE founders included staff of: the Public Communications Centre, a national

non-profit communications agency based in Dublin; the Combat Poverty Agency, an Irish government agency working to improve social inclusion in Ireland; Itech Research, a Dublin research consultancy specialising in social aspects of ICT; and the Women's Resource and Development Agency, a Belfast-based organisation providing support and services to networks of women's organisations in Northern Ireland.

After several planning meetings, the founders launched Community Exchange in October 1999. The content of the first CE email bulletin was information of interest to the non-profit sector, sourced and written by the founders. It was sent to about 50 email addresses of non-profit organisations in the Ireland and Northern Ireland, with a request to unsubscribe if the new bulletin was not wanted. Far from being unwanted, the response to CE was extremely positive. CE subscribers recommended it to other contacts in the non-profit sector, and the requests to subscribe began to trickle and then flow in.

In 1991, the CE coordinator founded Activelink, an organisation that for all intents and purposes exists only online. Activelink is a website for the non-profit sector. It has not been set up as a formal organisation (association, voluntary group, charity, club, or so on). The Activelink website hosts the CE website.

At the time of writing, Community Exchange is by far the most successful Irish network for information exchange online by the non-profit sector. It is well-known in the sector as the best online source of up-to-date news and information for the sector as a whole.

CE production process

The content of the first few CE email bulletins was sourced by the CE founders. After two or three issues, the CE bulletin subscribers started providing the content themselves - text is edited and distributed back to the subscribers by the CE coordinator.

The Community Exchange email bulletin has been operating continuously since October 1999. It remains more popular than the website as the source of CE. Community

Exchange subscribers and website users submit content for the bulletin to the CE coordinator by email or through an online form on the Activelink website. The CE coordinator edits and compiles the content into a text message and sends it out as a one-way email bulletin to the subscribers. In the early days, the CE bulletin was distributed monthly. Currently it is distributed once a week on Monday or Tuesday.

In December 1999 the first Community Exchange website was launched - updates were done on a monthly basis and each issue of the e-mail bulletin was published as an html file. The current website, developed towards the end of 2001 (www.activelink.ie) provides various new facilities: a simple online subscription box, an online form for submitting information, a small content management system for the CE section, and an online directory of Irish non-profit organisations.

The content for the website is produced in the same way as for the bulletin - sent to the CE coordinator by subscribers and organisations either by email or via the website form. The information contained in the Community Exchange section is updated daily. Information is automatically removed from public viewing after the 'expiry date'. The most recent information is edited into the weekly email.

The CE coordinator is the key person in the production process. His role entails: receiving and processing new subscription requests for CE, addressing problems with subscribers email addresses (bounces, etc.), receiving content by email and through the CE website, editing, verifying and classifying the content, sourcing other relevant content (especially from international sources), compiling and distributing the CE bulletin weekly, updating the CE website daily, performing routine maintenance functions on the website, managing phone calls (occasionally), planning further development (content and technical), and sourcing funding.

The job of the CE coordinator entails 12 to16 hours per week. Since the launch of Community Exchange in 1999, the same person has been contributing this time as a

volunteer. He is a professional graphic designer and website developer working with the non-profit sector.

CE subscribers and website users

The CE bulletin began with about 50 subscribers in October 1999. One year later, the number had grown to 500. By January 2002, the number of subscribers reached 1,000. It reached 2,000 in February 2003 and 3,000 by January 2004.

At the time of writing (July 2004), CE has 3,628 subscribers. The rate of growth is currently stable at about 1,000 additional subscribers a year. The churn rate of subscribers is fairly low – an average of about 12 requests a month to unsubscribe. In addition, an average of about 40 subscribers a month is removed from CE because of repeated bounces on their email address.

The subscribers come from many sectors of Irish society. They are: primarily staff and volunteers of Irish non-profit organisations, individual activists, staff of government departments and agencies working with non-profits, staff of other organisations working with non-profits, university students and staff, and local government or county council staff.

The email addresses of subscribers contain the domain names of more than 400 Irish organisations; some organisations have multiple staff members subscribed to CE. Many subscribers' email addresses have generic domain names which do not indicate their institutional affiliation.

Although the CE bulletin remains the most popular means of accessing CE, the CE website is growing in popularity. An analysis of the CE website logs in from January to July 2004 found the following:

In that seven-month period, CE website users made 72,504 successful requests for pages. On average an average day, the website users made 364 successful requests for pages. During that period, there were 46,484 distinct hosts served. In June, the busiest month, website users made 13,260 requests for pages. Users accessed the website most often on a Monday (the day the CE bulletin is distributed) and on Friday. They accessed the website primarily between 9 am to 7 pm.

The top 20 domain names of website users (by number of requests) were the most common Irish internet services providers (eircom.net, esat.net, indigo.ie, ntl.com, btopenworld.com) other commercial ISPs (netsource.ie, aol.com, msn.com) and Irish universities (ucc.ie, tcd.ie, nuigalway.ie, ucd.ie). The most popular general domains names of website users included: .net (includes eircom.net, a popular Irish ISP), com (Commercial), .org (Non-Profit Organisations), ie (Ireland), and .uk (United Kingdom).

CE content

The first CE email bulletin, distributed in October 1999, consisted of eight news and information items of interest to non-profit organisations. Since that first simple publication, the CE content has evolved considerably. The current weekly CE bulletin (19 July 2004) consists of 44 information items of interest to non-profits. There are links from the bulletin to the CE website for more information.

Community Exchange content is published in both the email bulletin and on the website under the following main headings: Events, campaigns, news; Training courses, workshops; Publications, resources; Job opportunities; and Volunteering.

All the content on the CE website is current and is removed automatically when it expires. There is no public archive available, although copies of past CE email bulletins are available upon request from the CE coordinator. The material contained on the CE website is available for public viewing and can be used by anyone for educational or strictly non-commercial purposes, provided that the source is acknowledged.

An analysis of the CE website in July 2004 found the following:

The content in all the categories is submitted by a wide range of non-profit organisations in Ireland – both the Republic and Northern Ireland. About one-third of the Irish population lives in the greater Dublin area and almost all the national NGOs are located there; about two-thirds of the CE content relates to events and opportunities in Dublin or nationally. The remaining one-third of CE content relates to events and opportunities in other Irish cities or in the rural areas. The CE coordinator sources and contributes primarily international content for the Publications / Resources section and content related to internet use, for the Events / Campaigns / News section.

All the information items contain a heading and a description of the item that runs about two to four paragraphs, followed by contact details for further information. The average length of each item is about 250 words, with the normal range being 100 to 400 words.

Of the five categories of information, the three most populated are: job opportunities; training courses and workshops; and events, campaigns and news. On July 15, there were 55 items under job opportunities. They included, for example: a project worker for the Centre for the Care of Survivors of Torture in Dublin; a childcare development worker for the Clare County Childcare Committee; two counselors for the Bereaved by Suicide Foundation; and a campaigns administrator for Enable Ireland.

Also on July 15, there were 45 items under training courses and workshops. These included, for example: a certificate in children and loss; a week-long training course in working with children through the arts; a workshop in participatory strategic planning; a public relations and lobbying workshop; the Drama League of Ireland residential summer school; a certificate in creative media / multimedia production; and a gender mainstreaming action-training course open to women in the border counties.

On the same day, there were 40 items under events, campaigns and news. They included, for example: the Social Welfare Campaign by the National Women's Council; the Fettecairn Youth Horse Project Summer Pony Camp; Irish Centre for Human Rights events; Save the Bogs summer events; Schizophrenia Awareness Week in Ireland; Sexual Violence Against Males conference; and the Green Dublin Initiative.

The CE website log analysis revealed that the most visited pages, with more than 1000 requests, were various job opportunities and training courses.

Sustaining Community Exchange

The main reasons for CE's success are: it provides needed, useful services to the non profit sector at no cost to the sector; its communication channel is open to everybody; it is (sort of) professionally managed; the news and information are updated regularly; the latest updates are emailed weekly; recruitment and volunteering requests and information are free to users; its publications (web and email) are simple, direct, and easy to access; and the co-coordinator enjoys the production process (part of his 'professional interest') and believes it is an important resource.

When considering the sustainability of Community Exchange, its considerable dependence on one volunteer is clearly a significant challenge. Although almost all the content is contributed voluntarily by a multitude of CE subscribers, producing and distributing the CE bulletin and maintaining the CE website depends on the volunteer contribution of the CE coordinator and the support of the organisation he works with. The CE coordinator is a highly-skilled position; if this volunteer were to withdraw his services, he would need to be replaced by a paid (probably well-paid) worker. Clearly, a sustainable revenue stream is a priority to ensure CE's continued success.

Generating a revenue stream for CE

Attempts to generate revenue to make CE sustainable have been ad-hoc and ongoing since it started in 1999. To date, only one attempt has been successful: a grant in 2004 from the Dublin City Development Board of Euro 3,000 for providing a web news feed to a project developed by the city's website Dublin.ie: www.childcareonline.ie

In addition to sporadic informal discussions with a variety of organisations and agencies, two other formal applications for funding have been unsuccessful and one is currently under consideration:

1. In February 2001, the four organisations that founded CE came together as an ad-hoc partnership to apply for funding in the region of Euro 136,000 under the government's CAIT program described earlier. The funding request was for an 18-month project to create and manage online resources and services for the community and voluntary sector in Ireland (based on the existing Community Exchange project). The proposed budget included staff for the project's coordination and evaluation, the organisation of three seminars for the sector, and various scheduled online chat-rooms on relevant Irish policy issues. The application was not successful (no reason given).

2. In 2003, Community Exchange approached The Wheel – a non-profit organisation that provides support to networks of information officers and opportunities for information exchange by community and voluntary organisations – to explore possible collaboration and funding (no amount specified) for various improvements to the CE bulletin. The Wheel saw an opportunity for generating content for their website. They proposed to give Activelink Euro 2,500 to keep producing CE but to brand the content as The Wheel's. To date, no agreement has been reached.

3. In 2004, an application was made to Comhairle - the national government agency responsible for supporting the provision of information, advice and advocacy on social services – under its annual Information Grants Scheme, designed to support innovative initiatives to improve access to information. The Information Grants Scheme for 2004 is intended to promote information and service delivery initiatives that proactively target groups that may experience social exclusion. The application for Euro 20,000 is for a

project to develop various online tools and services through a powerful Open Source Content Management System, freely accessible to the Irish community and voluntary sector. A decision is expected on this application in September 2004.

Community Exchange survey

In late 2003 and early 2004, the CE coordinator conducted an email survey of CE subscribers, in order to understand their views of Community Exchange and opinions on how it could be sustained financially. The survey, consisting of 11 questions and a request for comments and suggestions, was sent to 2,700 CE subscribers. A total of 630 questionnaires were completed. The survey findings are discussed below.

CE subscribers are avid readers of the CE email bulletin. About half (51%) read the bulletin always, the day they received the email. Forty-one percent read the bulletin always, a day or so after receiving it. Only six percent read the CE bulletin occasionally, and less than one percent read it rarely.

CE subscribers find the CE content useful. On a scale of 1 (not very useful) to 5 (very useful), subscribers ranked the "Events, Campaigns and News" section the most useful, with an overall rating of 3.9. The "Job Opportunities" section was ranked 3.8 overall; "Publications, Resources," was ranked 3.6; "Training Courses" was ranked 3.5; and "Volunteering Opportunities" was ranked 2.7.

Most CE subscribers are long-term members of the network. More than two-thirds (66%) had been receiving the email bulletin for more than a year. About a quarter (26%) had been receiving it for a few months, with only 7% receiving it for a few weeks.

CE subscribers are frequent email users. More than two-thirds (68%) checked their email several times every day. About a quarter (26%) checked their email once a day, and 6% checked it only once a week. No subscriber checked their email less than weekly.

CE subscribers prefer the weekly format of the email bulletin. When asked if they preferred to receive a shorter bulletin twice a week (instead of the longer weekly bulletin), 90 percent said no and 10 percent said yes.

Slightly less than half (47%) of CE email bulletin subscribers also accessed the CE website at least once a month. About 20 percent accessed at least once a month the Irish Links directory, a listing of non-profits in Ireland on the Activelink website that also hosts CE.

CE subscribers are not sure they want to be involved in an online public forum to discuss topics and exchange ideas relevant to the community and voluntary sector. When asked if they think there should be such a forum on the Activelink website, 58 percent said maybe, 37 percent said yes, and five percent said no.

Turning to financial sustainability issues, CE subscribers see a clear difference between the CE bulletin and the website when considering whether commercial advertising should be present. CE subscribers were split (51% yes, 49% no) on whether commercial companies should be allowed to advertise their products or services on the Activelink website (the CE website host). However they were opposed (77% no, 23% yes) to allowing commercial advertising on the CE email bulletin.

CE subscribers are unclear where the funding to sustain CE should come from. More than two-thirds (69%) believed that sponsorship and financial support should come from the community and voluntary sector, but a much lower percentage (38%) believed it should come from CE subscribers.

CE subscribers are not sure they want to pay for it. When asked if they would make a financial contribution to its maintenance and development, 54 percent said maybe, 27 percent said no, and only 19 percent said yes.

Making Community Exchange sustainable

Analyses of the results of the survey and the attempts to date to obtain funding for CE have highlighted four issues related to sustainability, namely ensuring a sustainable production process, subscriber base for the CE bulletin, source of content for CE, and a sustainable revenue stream.

Looking first at the production process, some possible solutions to improve and sustain it are to: set up a 'formal structure' for Activelink and bring a few more people on board to directly manage the services; develop more powerful online tools which will allow collaboration and participation (various online editors/co-coordinators); and automise some of the production process (email list management and distribution).

The subscriber base for CE appears to be sustainable. The number of website users is growing. The level of subscribers to the CE bulletin and CE website users has constantly increased without any public marketing or formal publicity. Most CE subscribers are long-term members of the network and they are keen readers of the CE bulletin. Potentially the target audience could grow even more rapidly by setting up alliances with other umbrella organisations, information providers, researchers and academics and by providing more targeted and tailored services. However this would lead to an increased day-to-day management and production workload.

The CE content is also sustainable. It is almost entirely generated by subscribers to the CE bulletin and other visitors to the CE website. CE subscribers find the content useful and there is a growing demand for the content on the CE website. Again there is lot of potential for providing more content including sections on specific issues of interest to the sector (funding resources, directory of service providers, policy developments, etc...). Articles and 'guides' could be commissioned to 'experts', requests from users could spark ideas for new information (for example various fundraisers and organisations have been asking if it was possible to set up a public calendar of fundraising events in order to avoid organising concomitant events). The content could be better structured and some of the categories could be broken into smaller groups (instead of a generic 'Events, Campaigns, News' CE could provide more focused sections).

To manage and develop the online resource requires time and money. The basic costs of hosting the CE website, the internet connection, updating the website and managing the email distribution list, and more general costs for possible development (organisational and technological) will require a sustainable revenue stream.

The responses to the CE survey by its subscribers and the difficulty to date in obtaining grant funding underline the challenge of achieving financial sustainability. Lately the CE coordinator has been experimenting with providing news feed to other websites, as a means of generating income for CE.

When considering future prospects for funding and different funding options, four main challenges arise: almost no public funding is allocated to ICT projects that are 'online only'; Activelink, the structure under which CE operates, is not a charity (and not even an organisation per se) and funding bodies do not support 'virtual entities'; most CE subscribers are opposed to allowing commercial advertising on the CE bulletin and only half agree it should be allowed on the CE website; and most CE subscribers believe that CE should be funded by the community and voluntary sector but not by CE subscribers themselves.

Possible avenues to explore in the future are: soliciting individual donations from CE subscribers, seeking advertisement revenues from organisations providing services to the non-profit sector or ethical companies, initiating a small charge for posting job opportunities, providing a news feed service to other websites, and setting up a legal entity for Activelink (association or charity) and applying for funding to various national and international foundations.

Conclusions

Can an online counter-public sphere created by and for the non-profit sector be sustained in Ireland? Consideration of the case of Community Exchange leads to a qualified "yes, with the ongoing contribution of considerable volunteer resources."

Community Exchange is a space where alternative messages are exchanged outside the mainstream media and public sphere. CE has evolved into a useful and timely mechanism that provides relevant information by and for non-profit organisations, strengthening their capacity to function as advocates or representatives of the groups they work with.

The extent to which the case of Community Exchange is relevant to other national contexts is unclear. CE developed within specific research, policy and practice contexts in Ireland in the 1990s, and it is an open question whether CE could have emerged and evolved successfully within other social, political, economic and social contexts. CE clearly emerged in response to the identified need for Irish non-profits to increase their ICT capacity, the lack of policy or public funding available for this purpose, and the lack of any other innovative internet activities in the Irish non-profit sector.

Securing a reliable and ongoing revenue stream remains the single biggest challenge for the sustainability of CE. It would be interesting to compare the case of Community Exchange to those of similar non-profit online networks in other countries in order to determine if economic constraints are indeed the most common barrier for the development of online counter-public spheres internationally. It has been argued the economic imperative will always work to the disadvantage of non-profit and community communication, when media and communication infrastructures and outlets overall are guided by the profit motive. On the other hand, resent research has also highlighted the increasing importance of non-profit networking using the internet on a global level (Cammaerts, 2004).

The case of Community Exchange underlined that a counter-public sphere by and for the non-profit sector will require the enthusiasm and energy of individual champions to get it started and ensure its ongoing operations. Without the dedication of a small group of volunteers, CE would never have become a valuable information resource for the Irish non-profit sector and a successful example of a counter-public sphere.

References

Cammaerts, B. (2004). *Civil Society "Participation" in WSIS: Does it really make a difference?* Paper presented at IAMCR 2004, Porto Alege, Brazil.

Downey, J., & Fenton, N. (2003). New media, counter publicity and the public sphere. *New Media & Society, 5*(2), 185-202.

Ennals, K. (1997). Online in the Irish Community Sector. *Local Economy, 12*(1), 72-77.

Frazer, N. (1992). Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT.

Government of Ireland. (2002). *New Connections: A strategy to realise the potential of the Information Society*. Dublin: Department of the Taoiseach.

Government of Ireland. (2003). *New Connections: Progress Report 1*. Dublin: Department of the Taoiseach.

Government of Ireland. (2004). *New Connections: Progress Report 2*. Dublin: Department of the Taoiseach.

Habermas, J. (1989[1962]). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: Polity.

McChesney, R. W. (1996). The Internet and the U.S. Communication Policy-Making in Historical and Critical Perspective. *Journal of Communication, 46*(1), 98-124.

McQuillan, H. (2001). Ennis Information Age Town: Virtuality Rooted in Reality. *Springer Lecture Notes in Computer Science, 2362*.

McQuillan, H. (2003). *Spanning the Digital Divide: A study of ICT use within Clare Youth Service*. Ennis: Ennis Information Age Town.

Melucci, A. (1996). *Challenging codes: Collective action in the information age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

Negt, O., & Kluge, A. (1993[1972]). *Public sphere and experience: Toward an analysis of the bourgeois adn proletarian public sphere*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

O'Donnell, S. (1996). Voluntary sector may miss out in the information society. *Poverty Today, 33*, 7-8.

O'Donnell, S. (2001a). Analysing the Internet and the Public Sphere: The Case of Womenslink. *Javnost, 8*(1), 39-58.

O'Donnell, S. (2001b). *Towards an Inclusive Information Society in Europe: The Role of Voluntary Organisations (EU-IST Study Report)*. Dublin: Itech Research.

O'Donnell, S., McQuillan, H., & Malina, A. (2003). *eInclusion: Expanding the Information Society in Ireland*. Dublin: Information Society Commission, Government of Ireland.

O'Donnell, S., & Trench, B. (1999). *Voluntary and community organizations in Ireland's "information society"*. Coleraine: University of Ulster.

O'Donnell, S., Trench, B., & Ennals, K. (1998). *Weak Connections: Final Report of the Research Project The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age*. Dublin: Dublin City University.

Stein, L. (2004). *Why "free market economics" will never support community and grassroots communication.* Paper presented at OurMedia IV, Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Trench, B., & O'Donnell, S. (1997). The Internet and Democratic Participation: Uses of ICTs by Voluntary and Community Organisations in Ireland. *Economic and Social Review, 28*(3), 213-235.