

Social Media and Civil Society Organizations (CSOS): Transformed Challenges for Governance

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This qualitative case study describes and analyzes the use of social media by Amnesty International Norway (AIN), a medium-sized human rights organization. Specifically, the case looks at how and to what extent AIN fulfilled its aims of enhancing information, public debate, and mobilization for campaigns through the use of Facebook and the organization's own website blog. While AIN saw great potentials in using social media, a core question was whether opening up for more lateral communication would lead to a loss of trustworthiness and organizational identity. Although AIN experienced an initial lack of success in using social media to generate response and mobilization in 2011, it was able to develop a powerful social media strategy resulting in high degrees of activity and exchange in 2014. Findings indicated that this change seemed to rely both on the ability of AIN to reflect upon its own governance structures and on the organization's ability to learn from experience.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is centered on the case of social media use by a Norwegian human rights organization, Amnesty International Norway (AIN). AIN is an example of a type of nonprofit organization (NPO) often labeled civil society organization (CSO)—an organization that organizes voluntary activities of citizens either at the local or national level. Using AIN, the authors studied the challenges that arise from using social media by membership based and democratically organized CSOs seeking to mobilize civic and political engagement for a cause. These organizations find themselves in the delicate situation of having to balance the needs and interests of internal *and* external constituencies, creating challenges to their internal democratic structures as well as their position in relation to the public.

This chapter asks two main questions. First, did AIN achieve the aims of its new social media policy—improving the quality and quantity of information provided; encouraging wider public debate on human rights issues; and galvanizing support behind the organization’s campaigns in 2010 and 2014 respectively? Secondly, what organizational tensions, challenges and opportunities surfaced during AIN’s experience with using social media?

Previous research has shown that while social media are used extensively by social movements and informal networks, established civil society has yet to take full advantage of the interactive and mobilizing potential of social media (Eimhjellen, Wollebæk, & Strømsnes, 2013; Hackler & Saxton, 2007; Steen-Johnsen, Enjolras, & Kruse, 2012; Stein, 2009). One apparent reason formalized organizations are reticent in their use of social media is that the formal organization usually employs hierarchies and structured processes, both of which are difficult to harmonize with the lateral, interactive, and time compressed logic of social media. This case study adds to our knowledge about which facets of an organization are of importance when CSOs, as a specific type of organization, are faced with social media. Particularly, the study focuses on the explicit challenges of maintaining public perceptions of trustworthiness and those related to centralization and control.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, the theoretical frameworks used to analyze the case are presented including, most importantly, a perspective on governance in CSOs. Next, the methodology employed by the authors is described, followed by a short history of Amnesty International and Amnesty International Norway, focusing on the processes of strategic change that underlie AIN’s use of social media. The next section describes the communication strategies, aims and methods that were developed by AIN in 2010/2011, and identifies the challenges and opportunities experienced by the organization in its early adoption of social media. Then the solutions and outcomes section draws on the authors’ observations from 2014 to illustrate the changes AIN has put in place since the launch of their

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