

## SUMMARY

### **A summarizing reflection on the research project "Social engagement, civil society and online media"**

Online media are often viewed as the solution to all kinds of problems, yet this says more about our fascination with (media) technology than about these media's actual ability to fix those problems effectively and in an exclusive way. Nonetheless, online media do also have something to offer, not because they are panaceas, but because – provided they are used wisely – they can help citizens and civil society organisations attain their objectives (to greater effect).

The key question in this report is deceptively simple: How are online media used to underpin social engagement? More specifically, how can these online media be used to this end in and by civil society?

A question like this comes dangerously close to the category of questions that are so wide-ranging as to be unanswerable. At the very least, answering questions of this kind requires an innovative combination of methods, of which this study thankfully makes use (for more details see the report itself). However, one important aspect that needs to be emphasised here is the choice to work with a typology. The development of any typology has its drawbacks, because a great many details are invariably lost, but the major strength of applying one is that it provides an overview of a tremendous diversity, in this instance the variety of online practices that foster social engagement. Furthermore, the components (or dimensions) of this typology are not just there to lend structure to the report, but also constitute an integral part of the results of the study. In other words, they did not arise arbitrarily, but were generated through the analysis that preceded the study.

What the study came up with was a typology comprising two basic dimensions. The role of online media in and as used by civil society (to promote social engagement) depends first and foremost on a distinction between internal, internal-external and external use.

The second basic dimension is the distinction between access, interaction and participation.

1. The internal use of online media in and among civil society is often overlooked in discussions about social engagement, but in this context it is extremely important. The argument is this: civil society itself is an environment of social engagement and the online media that support the work of organisations active in this domain, in so doing, also effectively help to foster social engagement. It is here we encounter the first set of online practices that enable civil society organisations to support their administration, procurement, filing, registration, internal communications and internal democratic functioning.

Of course, civil society organisations do not focus exclusively on their own actions, and their use of online media, as a function of social engagement, is often designed to attain objectives related to specific social domains. That said, these civil society organisations' relations with the outside world are complicated, so the typology makes use of two components (internal-external and external) to describe and understand them. This, too, is a key distinction that was identified in this study, because two very different kinds of practices are involved here. In some cases civil society organisations aim to draw citizens who find themselves outside their scope of activity into the respective organisation (in many different ways); on other occasions they try to forge links between themselves and the citizens in question. One example of this involves the recruitment of volunteers or staff. These kinds of practices fall into the category internal-external, as do the possibilities given to citizens to offer financial support or offers of e-learning by organisations.

In other instances, organisations strengthen citizens' engagement without directly involving them in their actual workings. In this context, organisations play a role that entails giving access to content or technology, stimulating interactions between various other individuals, groups or organisations, or facilitating these citizens' participation in social domains other than the organisation itself. Practices of this kind fall into the external category, and examples include organisations that offer free and/or open software and organisations that offer loans to other organisations via an online platform or use their own website to collect money for other organisations.

2. The second basic dimension to emerge from this study is the distinction between access, interaction and participation. This distinction, combined with a supporting dimension (differentiation between organisations, people, content and typology), has already been used in previous publications (see Carpentier, 2011). This dimension seems eminently useful in the context of this study for recognising, categorising and structuring the current range of practices. **Access** is all about (offering) availability and presence, e.g. providing access to information or to people (by making them contactable) or technology (e.g. by providing computers). Here we see that online media not only enable information to be put to use in what is often a more efficient manner (within

the organisation), they also make it possible for organisations to disseminate information about themselves and their staff, provide access to the documents they have produced, and (sometimes) place technology at users' disposal. On the external level we see that online media can be used to disseminate information about other organisations and unlock information stemming from them. In some cases access is provided to technology, for example by organisations in the free and/or open software movement (F/LOSS) or in the WiFi community movement.

The second element of the second basic dimension is **interaction**. Interaction is a concept that denotes what are termed socio-communicative relations, where people communicate with each other and/or act together (among other things within communities or organisations), where people interact with texts (e.g. interpreting them), or where people interact with technology. Here again, there are many different ways of interacting, which immediately means that online media can be used in many different ways. Internally, many forms of online cooperation are possible, and online media are also used to study and teach or learn. At the internal-external and external levels we see a similar structure (admittedly with a different purpose), with five forms of interactive use of online media: financing, recruiting, teaching or learning, networking and mobilising, complemented with the divulgence of specific information (so-called social curation, whereby people point to interesting content that they found on other platforms) and the teaching of skills in the use of online technologies.

At the internal-external level, we see online media used to receive donations, recruit staff and volunteers, assign tasks, study, create a community around the organisation, conduct campaigns, allow people to interact with content they have produced themselves and with technology. Furthermore, (at the external level) online media are used to make online donations, to enable co-financing and joint purchases, stimulate volunteer work, support the sharing of know-how, form networks, expand social dialogue, enable campaigns to be run and allow people to interact with content and technologies.

Finally, there is the third concept of the second basic dimension: **participation**. In the study in question, this concept acquires a specific significance because it refers to joint decision-making, both formal and informal. In practice this means that the discussion on participation ultimately revolves around power and the equality of power positions. Once again, online media are used here: in the case of internal and internal-external use they serve for participation **in** the organisation, whereby some forms of this participation are more minimal and others are more maximal. At the internal level online media are used to foster internal (organisational) democracy, for example by providing access to (internal) policy documents, or to facilitate it through forms of co-decision-making.

At the internal-external level we see that organisations use online media to gain advice from outside the organisation, launch a dialogue about their organisation, poll their supporters or, in the more radical forms, to allow outsiders to take part in decision-making processes.

Participation also plays a role at the external level, but in such scenarios it is more a question of participation **via** organisations, with reference made to the role they play in empowering people in other, external contexts (i.e. outside the organisation in question). Often, the focus is on emancipating citizens and giving them greater influence in the political domain, as for example in the case of a project that informs citizens about how taxpayers' money is spent. However, we see that online media are also used to support their participation in a cultural and media context and in the domains of knowledge and technology, amongst other things.

The following table below affords an overview of the typology developed here.

		Internal	Internal-external	External
<b>Acces</b>	Organisation			
	People			
	Content			
	Technology			
<b>Interaction</b>	Organisation			
	People			
	Content			
	Technology			
<b>Participation</b>	Organisation			
	People			
	Content			
	Technology			

In addition to highlighting the diversity of online practices, this study also focussed on their frequency, based on a survey of 902 Belgian civil society organisations that provided information on how often organisations use which online media and insights into the practices used to foster engagement. Here are some of the striking findings about organisations' use of online media: roughly 90% of civil society organisations have their own website; virtually all organisations (99.4%) use e-mail; 59.2% claim to use social networking sites, 53.1% text messages and 41.6% an intranet. So we can conclude that conventional online media are widespread within civil society. Other technologies are less commonly used, such as online cooperation and video sharing 25-35%; Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), photo sharing, blogging and micro-blogging 15%-25%; mobile apps, RSS feeds, QR codes and video-conferencing 10-15%; whereas chat rooms, magazine publishing, social curation, wikis and podcasting all scored less than 10%. The differences between various types of organisations hinge primarily on where the organisations are active geographically, and on their sector of activity, with some online media being used more by the cultural sector.

When we look at the use of online media in terms of practices that promote engagement, we find high percentages at the internal level for communication, exchanges of information and networking, but lower percentages for the internal use of online media for teaching/learning and research, which are used by somewhere between 50 and 60% of the surveyed organisations or thereabouts. At the internal-external level we find the same strong emphasis on communication, the exchange of information and networking, but also high scores (of roughly 80%) for the use of online media for persuasive purposes (convincing people). The figures for the (interactive) use of online media for teaching/learning, recruiting and financing are lower, especially when we consider the actual use of various online technologies. In this latter instance the percentages are below 20%, and most of the more participative forms of online usage also yielded low percentages. Finally, at the external level – an aspect covered by relatively few of the questions included in the survey – we see low percentages of below 15% for the interactive use of online media for financing, networking and participation. The exceptions here concern the use of social curation (44%) and helping other organisations to develop their website (27.5%). When we consider the differences between the organisations, we see that these differences are significant mainly with regard to the geographical scope of the organisations' activities, the region to which they belong and their intranet use.

The conclusion underscores the relevance of this study for civil society. One of the important lessons to be learnt is that the importance of online media for organisations should not be overestimated, because it constantly needs to be embedded (and made meaningful) within the context of the organisations themselves. At the same time, the importance of online media must not be underestimated, because they offer a great many possibilities, which are effectively deployed, as this study shows. This does not mean there are no gaps or opportunities to do better. If we start off by considering the first basic dimension (internal/internal-external/external), we see that on the external side of this dimension there are many opportunities for improvement. Yet there are also a number of gaps relating to the second basic dimension. At the interactive level we see that the more innovative forms of online media use – for financing, recruiting and teaching purposes – are limited, and the presumption here is that a number of possibilities are being underexploited. The same observation applies to the participative dimension, at the internal, internal-external and external levels. Stopping short of suggesting that all organisations should start to develop maximalist participative logics at all levels, it is worth pointing out that here, too, the available opportunities are being underexploited. This study, with its many examples, offers many possible sources of inspiration and suggests that there are many lessons to be learnt from the experiences of other organisations at home and abroad. Yet it should be borne in mind that organisations always need to integrate online media into their activities and objectives and that such media cannot constitute comprehensive stand-alone solutions.

At the same time, the study also calls for further support with respect to the promotion of expertise; the facilitation of communicative (and participative) assessments of civil society organisations; the organisation of needs studies for individual organisations (together with the establishment of networks) and per sector (combined with consultations); better promotion of existing (positive) examples; the mainstreaming of (consideration of) the use of (online) media within the King Baudouin Foundation; and more generally speaking the further reinforcement of a participative culture within civil society.