

Katrina Miller-Stevens* and Matthew J. Gable

Lobbying in the Virtual World: Perceptions in the Nonprofit Sector

Abstract: Electronic lobbying efforts have become an essential, yet profoundly underutilized strategy of nonprofit organizations to advance the representation of the underserved in policymaking. Through a survey and interviews of leaders and staff members in state nonprofit associations that are members of the National Council of Nonprofits, this study examines the use and perceived effectiveness of nonprofit electronic lobbying activities and the communication channels employed for this purpose, in addition to exploring social crises and technological barriers potentially limiting nonprofit adoption of these activities. The study concludes that state nonprofit associations actively utilize email as an electronic lobbying activity to reach policymakers, but the activity is rarely employed to disseminate information to the general public. Social media methods such as blogging and social networking sites are used less frequently, but they are often perceived as being highly effective as a grassroots lobbying activity.

Keywords: advocacy, electronic lobbying, lobbying, public policy

*Corresponding author: **Katrina Miller-Stevens**, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23529, USA, E-mail: klmiller@odu.edu

Matthew J. Gable, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23529, USA, E-mail: matthewgable@gmail.com

How do nonprofit organizations lobby – or try to affect legislation – through activities on the Internet? Electronic lobbying efforts have become an essential, yet profoundly underutilized, strategy of nonprofit organizations to advance the representation of the underserved in policymaking. Of concern are the many nonprofit organizations that are unsure of information technology’s role in lobbying and the extent to which this tool can be used without jeopardizing an organization’s tax-exempt status. Nonprofit lobbying, on the Internet or otherwise, is an activity that has been stifled through various social conditions. This study addresses these social conditions while exploring how often electronic lobbying is used, as well as how effective it is perceived to be, by nonprofit associations. In this pursuit, this study examines a nationwide sample of state

nonprofit associations that are members of the National Council of Nonprofits. Through a survey and follow-up interviews, leaders and staff in the associations report on their organization's use of electronic communications for lobbying and how effective they perceive these communication channels to be. Our study aims to examine electronic lobbying within a framework that is applicable to, and informative for, nonprofit organizations. To that end, information is presented with an emphasis on those concepts relevant to nonprofit lobbying, including advocacy and political participation.

This article also addresses two crises in nonprofit lobbying regarding the underutilization of this important activity – a crisis of terminology and a crisis of interpretation of the law. These crises contribute to a lack of nonprofit participation in lobbying, electronic or otherwise, even though it may be in the nonprofit organization's best interest and that of their constituents to do so. The article's main analysis of specific electronic lobbying activities is thus underscored by the added gravity of these more general crises.

This study begins by outlining the broader concepts of nonprofit lobbying and two crises seen in the nonprofit sector. This contextual background leads to a discussion of the challenges of electronic lobbying activities in the nonprofit sector. After reviewing these challenges, the methodology of the study is presented, and the results of the survey and interviews are discussed. The article comes to a close with a critique of electronic lobbying as a tool for nonprofit organizations to impact policymaking. Future avenues of research in this area are also proposed.

Broader concepts of nonprofit lobbying

A brief mention of the broader concept of nonprofit advocacy provides the reader with a context in which to understand the normative and often unique character of nonprofit lobbying. Jenkins (1987, 324) sees advocacy as a “major force for the renewal of American democracy”, and as an element counteracting interests of big business. Though most policy analysts and scholars of the nonprofit sector agree that nonprofit advocacy is a significant political component of the American nonprofit sector (Jenkins 1987; McNutt and Boland 1999; Child and Grønbjerg 2007), advocacy is a lopsided battle: one which entails pursuing public interests (Andrews and Edwards 2004) and a struggle to represent collective interests against powerful elite influences (McNutt 2008; Suárez 2009). This lopsidedness regarding the advocacy of often-vulnerable publics forms another impetus to increase awareness of the potential impact of nonprofit lobbying.

In many ways, advocacy is the first strategic initiative of nonprofit organizations in their efforts to influence public policy. Nonprofit scholars refer to this type of advocacy as “public policy advocacy,” which encompasses a multitude of strategies including “litigation, public education, judicial advocacy, administrative lobbying, the mobilization of grassroots support and . . . the direct lobbying of politicians” (Guo and Saxton 2010, 2). This study recognizes advocacy as an overarching term describing an entity’s effort to elicit policy change (Fitzgerald and McNutt 1999), but the focus is on nonprofit lobbying – specifically mobilization of grassroots support (also referred to as indirect lobbying) and direct lobbying of policymakers to change specific legislation (Vernick 1999). Grassroots and direct lobbying strategies are categorized in the Internal Revenue Service’s (IRS) definition of lobbying, and this categorization is commonly found in the academic literature discussing lobbying (see Berry 1997 and Wyszomirski 1998 among many others). According to the IRS, lobbying is considered as an attempt to “influence legislation if [the organization] contacts, or urges the public to contact, members or employees of a legislative body for the purpose of proposing, supporting, or opposing legislation, or if the organization advocates the adoption or rejection of legislation” (Internal Revenue Service 2013, para. 3).

Direct lobbying includes such activities as initiating face-to-face contact with legislators by attending fundraisers, political events, and legislative or committee meetings to discuss policy issues and establish relationships with policymakers (Miller 1994; Wolpe and Levine 1996; Rees 1999; Nicholson-Crotty 2007). Organizations may also employ communication channels such as one-on-one telephone conversations, conference calls, and written communication through letters, emails, and facsimiles (Wolpe and Levine 1996; McNutt and Boland 1999; Rees 1999).

In contrast, grassroots lobbying is intended to mobilize citizens that share similar views to contact elected and appointed officials regarding specific legislation (Berry 1997). Grassroots lobbying is a strategy that relies on the staff and volunteers of nonprofit organizations to educate the public and disseminate information, often through electronic communication channels including email, social media, and general information pages on an organization’s website. Other communication mediums for disseminating information include television advertisements, print advertisements, and town hall meetings (McNutt and Boland 1999; Rees 1999).

It should be noted that many grassroots lobbying activities can be viewed as public education or coalition building advocacy strategies rather than the more specific categorization of lobbying. While we recognize this interpretation as one view that can be applied to electronic lobbying, this study specifically defines

electronic lobbying as any activity or communication channel on the Internet that is employed to directly or indirectly influence legislation.

In addition to explaining the relationships between advocacy and lobbying, it is important to mention the theoretical bedrock upon which much of the literature is based, advocacy or otherwise. Broadly, most political interest group activity (and for the purposes here, electronic lobbying) is often conceived of as a facet of political participation (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Salisbury and Conklin 1998). In the context of this study, nonprofit lobbying is indeed considered as a facet of political participation, with unique qualities that distinguish it from other forms of political participation.

Two crises of nonprofit lobbying

At this time in the development of nonprofit organizations, practically any study of nonprofit lobbying would be well advised to give mention to the current landscape (and systemic dysfunction) regarding the adoption of lobbying tactics. Though a crisis theme is supplemental to the main body of this study, briefly highlighting these issues not only illuminates an important phenomenon, but also lends valuable context. On top of a recurrent, decades-old concern at the federal level about the political efforts of nonprofit organizations (Wyszomirski 1998), there are also at least two current crises surrounding nonprofit lobbying that contribute to the lack of lobbying in the nonprofit sector. The term “crisis” is used here in a literal sense, but also in another way. Kuhn (1996) mentions crises as leading to shifts in paradigms and myriad researchers have productively co-opted this concept to suit their needs. If this analysis may do the same, to invoke crisis in this way is to point to a major problem regarding the current paradigm of nonprofit lobbying and its status quo: the unnecessary underutilization of lobbying techniques, electronic or otherwise. The currently accepted paradigm is that nonprofit organizations cannot or do not take advantage of the opportunity to lobby for their constituencies, leading to less representation for the groups these nonprofit organizations represent. Acknowledging this problem provides important context to nonprofit lobbying studies and sheds light on these crucial issues in nonprofit lobbying.

The first crisis is one of terminology regarding the words “advocacy” and “lobbying.” Lobbying and the more general term advocacy are often used interchangeably in the nonprofit sector. For example, a large professional association organized an event called “Advocacy Week.” While this event was clearly labeled as advocacy, it was in reality a grassroots email lobbying campaign

designed to garner support for legislative change. The focus was to encourage email recipients to send persuasive emails to Capitol Hill in response to a proposed legislative amendment that would affect the profession and the constituency served by this sector of the nonprofit sphere. While the commutability of these two words is a common reality in many facets of life, and it is in some ways counterproductive to agonize over terminology, in this case the ambiguity causes a lack of clarity about what this nonprofit organizations do, and it must be addressed. Conceptually, this ambiguity of terms is directly related to the second crisis.

The second issue contributing to the severe underutilization of lobbying in the nonprofit sector is a crisis of law, or perhaps more specifically, a crisis of interpretation of the law. Nonprofit organizations registered as 501(c)(3) organizations with the Internal Revenue Service must follow lobbying regulations set by the Internal Revenue Code (26 U.S.C. § 501). These regulations are the basis for most of the restrictions on nonprofit lobbying, and in many ways the source of the confusion. The Internal Revenue Code makes two important distinctions regarding lobbying. The first, direct lobbying, is a statement, email, or other communication to a legislator or other official in a position to influence legislation that: “(1) refers to specific legislation and (2) reflects a view on the legislation” (26 U.S.C. § 501; Vernick 1999, 1426). The other, grassroots lobbying, comes about when an attempt is made to communicate a certain view on legislation to members of the public. The nonprofit organization “must (1) refer to specific legislation, (2) reflect a view on the legislation, and (3) include a ‘call to action’” (26 U.S.C. § 501; Vernick 1999, 1426). Under 501(c)(3), organizations may lobby to a “substantial” degree (26 U.S.C. §501). The meaning of “substantial” is somewhat unclear, and nonprofit leaders must work within this ambiguity, though with legal counsel or with the guidance of other nonprofit members this barrier can be overcome (Berry 2003). The fundamentals of, and clarifications regarding, the Internal Revenue Service’s guidelines and resulting issues have been discussed effectively elsewhere (Berry 2003; Kingsley, Harmon, Pomeranz, and Guinane 2000; Suárez and Hwang 2008; Vernick 1999), but to summarize, ambiguity regarding the nature of lobbying and the law often result in many nonprofit members refraining from lobbying rather than risk violating the Internal Revenue Code (Berry 2003). Indeed, even when referring to the more general concept of nonprofit advocacy, LeRoux and Goerdel (2009) note that leaders in nonprofit organizations are worried about losing funding if they pursue advocacy to a greater extent.

Despite the cloud of ambiguity caused by these crises, Berry’s (2003) perspective is reaffirmed later in this paper: nonprofit organizations can, and often should, lobby. Lobbying can help better represent constituencies, be they

professional members or vulnerable and underrepresented populations. By including a nationwide study of nonprofit leaders that gauges their perceptions of electronic lobbying techniques, we aim to both supplement the field's scarce empirical knowledge of nonprofit electronic lobbying and also help recognize these crises of awareness and methods.

Information technology and nonprofit lobbying: Electronic lobbying

The Internet is increasingly becoming a part of the way nonprofit organizations perform day-to-day activities, from purchasing supplies, doing research, and fundraising (Hackler and Saxton 2007), to the use of websites for lobbying (Suárez 2009). Since nonprofit organizations and their constituents clearly have a stake in any melding of technological and traditional lobbying, it is the broad purpose here to address this increasingly critical, yet under-adopted, aspect of policymaking. It is important to address the ambiguity in nonprofit lobbying as an issue contributing to underrepresentation and inequality. This issue can be remedied by harnessing the potentiality of the Internet, thus allowing nonprofit organizations to better serve populations both politically and effectively.

Electronic lobbying is simply lobbying via electronic means, or more specifically, the utilization of Web technologies for lobbying. Nonprofit organizations participating in this activity focus on both direct and grassroots lobbying strategies by communicating with legislators and organizing constituencies and publics to address legislative issues through electronic means. Generally, online engagement in the policy process may include informative, consultative, and participatory aspects (Reddick 2012), and there are many different opportunities for communication. Email, blogs, websites, chat rooms, e-newsletters, and virtual communities are just a few of the tools available to nonprofit organizations willing and able to take lobbying online (Reddick 2012). And while older Web technologies such as email are viable lobbying activities (see Bergan 2009), newer technologies such as community networking or blogging can enable an organization's message to be far more accessible. The call to lobby can be available to almost anyone with an Internet connection, rather than just the individuals on an emailing list.

There are several reasons why electronic lobbying is such an important activity for nonprofit organizations. First, there is a great potential for cost savings in adopting electronic communication channels. Nonprofit organizations often

face substantial challenges to adopting information technology, such as working with few resources while also dealing with competition. At the same time, “IT [information technology] is a way to address these challenges” (Reddick 2012, 146), through potential time savings via near instant response times, reduction in paper, ink, and postage use, and a much greater numeric potential for communication. Indeed, the ability of list-serves as an informational distribution tool is hard to duplicate by nonelectronic means.

The adoption of technologically advanced message delivery strategies can empower a nonprofit organization, but it is also crucial to note the potential of technology to widen the gap further for less tech-savvy organizations (Hackler and Saxton 2007). The Internet has been and will certainly continue to be a source of information for millions, but the Internet as an informational equalizer for smaller organizations may not be so easily realized, creating and furthering an organizational “digital divide” (McNutt 2008, 2; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2010, 488). Recent research from Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2010) suggests that many of the group inequalities regarding political participation found offline still manifest online, and practitioners and researchers should be aware that it is up to everyone involved to realize this persisting inequality. The contrast of Internet use between urban and rural populations is also quite pronounced. As of 2010, 70% of nonrural residents had high-speed Internet at home, while only 50% of rural Americans had those services (Smith 2010). This digital divide leads one to ask how much of the population electronic lobbying activities reach, and whether the target groups are capable of receiving the message through Internet access.

However, the potential for greater equality is there. The intuitive appeal of information on the Internet, and the explosion of free programs, documents, and other signs of informational empowerment are very promising. With technologies such as text-to-speech, voice recognition, and translation offerings, as well as myriad other options for computing, it is hard to deny the empowering potentiality of the electronic realm.

Methodology

To answer the questions posited above, we surveyed leaders of state nonprofit associations that are members of the National Council of Nonprofits. The associations that belong to the National Council of Nonprofits are distinct from many other nonprofit organizations, in that they have a substantial presence in the policy arena, and have recently been recognized for their growing role in policy-making (Balassiano and Chandler 2010). The associations are umbrella

organizations that serve as collaborative vessels to initiate lobbying on behalf of their nonprofit members and the nonprofit sector. In addition to lobbying, the associations provide a wide range of services to their members including support services, education and communication services, advocacy, and a forum for networking (Hudson and Bielefeld 1997; Young 2001, Balassiano and Chandler 2010). Abramson and McCarthy (2002) note that as the nonprofit sector in the United States has grown, the strength and importance of nonprofit umbrella associations has grown as well. However, there has been little systematic analysis of these organizations and few data sources or previous studies from which to draw information.

The National Council of Nonprofits' membership consists of state nonprofit associations that provide advocacy and member assistance functions on sector-wide issues pertinent to their local regions. This organization represents its members – state nonprofit associations – on a national level, while the state nonprofit associations represent their nonprofit members on a state or local level (Balassiano and Chandler 2010; National Council of Nonprofits 2010). At the time of this study in 2010, the National Council of Nonprofits' membership included 40 state nonprofit associations. State nonprofit associations have a collective membership of over 25,000 nonprofit organizations (National Council of Nonprofits 2013). The mission statements of most state nonprofit associations emphasize policy advocacy on behalf of all types of nonprofit organizations in the nonprofit sector. Their advocacy and lobbying efforts focus on policy issues such as lobbying reform, nonprofit organizations' rights to communicate and interact with elected or appointed officials, tax-incentive support for charitable giving, regulatory activities of state and federal agencies that monitor the nonprofit sector, and laws regulating procurement issues of the nonprofit sector. State nonprofit associations are of particular interest to scholars studying nonprofit lobbying in that, unlike the majority of nonprofit organizations, most of the associations take on an active role in lobbying to influence public policy.

The survey for this study was distributed via email and hard copy to the Director, CEO, or President (titles vary by association) of each state nonprofit association and to other staff members working on public policy or lobbying activities. Surveys were distributed to an average of three individuals per state nonprofit association totaling 138 surveys. The majority of state nonprofit associations include a paid staff of 32 individuals or less with some state nonprofit associations employing only one staff member. Therefore, a limited number of individuals at each association work on lobbying activities, which lowers the sample size.

The survey asked participants to report on the frequency of use and perceived effectiveness of lobbying activities and communication channels

employed by their respective associations over the two-year period of 2008–2009. The activities and communication channels are presented in the survey under two headings: indirect/grassroots and direct strategies. The survey defines an indirect/grassroots lobbying strategy as any activity the “organization uses to make the public aware of policy issues that the organization supports.” The survey defines a direct lobbying strategy as any activity “in which the nonprofit organization makes direct contact with legislators and their staffs, or other appointed or elected government officials, for the purpose of building allies among influential policymakers.”

This study focuses specifically on the electronic lobbying activities and communication channels reported in the survey including (1) emailing the association’s membership to disseminate information and encouraging members to contact policymakers [The literature is unclear as to whether emailing the membership of an organization is considered grassroots lobbying. Some authors argue that emailing the membership should not be considered lobbying, while others state that the IRS does consider this activity as lobbying (for an example, see Kingsley, Harmon, Pomeranz, and Guinane 2000). For the purposes of this paper, emailing the membership of an organization is considered electronic lobbying.], (2) emailing staff members of state legislators, (3) emailing state legislators, (4) developing online community networks on existing platforms, including the social networking sites Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, (5) creating online blogging websites for community networking on the customized website of the association, (6) emailing other elected officials (such as the offices of governors or attorneys general) and/or their staff members, and (7) emailing the general public to encourage citizens to contact policymakers.

Participants rated the frequency of use of each electronic lobbying tactic on a scale of zero to four, with 0 = Never, 1 = Relatively infrequent, 2 = Sometimes, but not often, 3 = Often, but not ongoing, 4 = Ongoing. Participants then rated their perceived effectiveness of each electronic lobbying activity their association has employed (activities not used were omitted from this part of the survey) on a scale of one to four, with 1 = Low effectiveness, 2 = Moderate effectiveness, 3 = High effectiveness, 4 = Very high effectiveness. The survey did not offer an option of 0 = Not effective based on the assumption that use of the activity indicates some perception of effectiveness.

Of the 138 surveys sent to individuals working on lobbying activities in the state nonprofit associations, 47 surveys were returned equaling a 34% response rate. Respondents and nonrespondents of the survey do not differ significantly in their job responsibilities and positions. Thus, the results of the survey are generalizable across the 40 state nonprofit associations. More importantly, the 47 individuals who returned surveys represent 27 (68%) of the 40 associations.

Follow-up interviews were conducted to gain a more in-depth understanding of state nonprofit associations' use and perceived effectiveness of electronic lobbying activities. Survey participants were asked at the end of the survey whether they would volunteer to participate in an interview. Of the 47 individuals who responded to the survey, 28 volunteered. When contacted, only 13 participants representing 11 state nonprofit associations agreed to set up a time for the interview. The 13 individuals represent a variety of work positions in the state nonprofit associations, including the Director of Public Policy ($n = 4$), Public Policy Manager/Officer/Analyst ($n = 4$), Director/CEO/President ($n = 3$), Membership Director ($n = 1$), and Chief Operations Officer ($n = 1$).

It is important to note that the unit of analysis for this study is the organization, not the individual. Therefore, answers to the surveys of states with multiple respondents were averaged to have one response per state in the data set. This approach is consistent with previous research using surveys to explore organizational levels. Survey responses within associations were very similar; therefore this approach is appropriate for the analysis. It must also be noted that one respondent's survey representing one state nonprofit association was thrown out due to the respondent's error. Therefore, data analyzed from the surveys are based on an n of 26 associations, not 27.

Results and discussion

As indicated in Table 1, state nonprofit associations engage in five of the six email activities listed on the survey at a rate between sometimes (2.00) and often (4.00). The most prominent of the six activities is emailing members of the association with a frequency rate of 3.56 out of 4. Contacting staff members of state legislators via email ranks next with a rate of 2.73 out of 4, then emailing state legislators with a rate of 2.66 out of 4, and finally emailing other elected officials or their staff members with a rating of 2.01 out of 4. Surprisingly, emailing the general public to inform individuals of a policy issue is not an electronic communication channel often used by state nonprofit associations, with a rating of 0.54 out of 4.

Follow-up interviews reveal even more detail on the methods for using email as a lobbying activity. When trying to gain support on a policy issue, one respondent notes his particular association "sends out an action alert to members ... to encourage [the] nonprofit organizations to contact legislators in the district where they reside. Sometimes we send that out generally [to the membership], or if it's specific to legislators, we target that specific legislator." Another respondent explains his organization emails "action alerts to our members

Table 1: Electronic lobbying activities of state nonprofit associations ($n = 26$ associations).

Electronic lobbying activity	Frequency of use*		Perceived effectiveness**	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. Email members of the Association to disseminate information and encourage members to contact policymakers	3.56	(0.68)	3.04	(1.16)
2. Contact staff members of legislators through email	2.73	(1.33)	3.38	(1.28)
3. Contact legislators through email	2.66	(1.08)	3.07	(1.35)
4. Develop community networks on existing services (e.g. Facebook)	2.35	(1.48)	3.27	(1.30)
5. Create local blogging website for community networking	2.03	(1.53)	3.44	(1.80)
6. Contact other elected officials and/or their staff members by email	2.01	(1.10)	3.11	(1.58)
7. Email the general public to encourage them to contact policymakers	0.54	(1.08)	3.44	(1.80)

Notes: *Scale of frequency of use: 4 = Ongoing, 3 = Often, but not ongoing, 2 = Sometimes, but not often, 1 = Infrequently, 0 = Never; **Scale of perceived effectiveness: 4 = Very high effectiveness, 3 = High effectiveness, 2 = Moderate effectiveness, 1 = Low effectiveness.

saying please call members of the house of the affairs committee or please call your representative” in response to a policy issue. A third respondent emphasizes that when a policy issue is of grave importance, the association emails information directly to a legislator.

The perceived effectiveness of email as a lobbying activity rates between high effectiveness (3.00) and very high effectiveness (4.00) for each of the six email activities. Follow-up interviews reveal that respondents perceive email as an effective electronic lobbying tactic since they often receive feedback or responses to emails from their members, state legislators, and staff members of state legislators. As noted previously, a likely explanation for this result is that email is a convenient tool that takes minimal resources in terms of time, staff, and technology. One inconsistency of this assumption must be noted. Counter to its low frequency of use (0.54 out of 4), emailing the general public is perceived as a highly effective lobbying activity for disseminating information, rating 3.44 out of 4. This result could reflect that state nonprofit associations have had success at influencing the general public in the few times the associations have used email in this context. Individuals in the follow-up interviews indicate a concern for measuring the effectiveness of emailing individuals in the broad community. They express an inability to measure the extent to which

email influences its recipients in the general public and whether citizens are in turn driven to contact their representatives.

An additional finding of the survey and follow-up interviews focuses on the development of online community networks through existing services and local blogging websites. Respondents to the survey and follow-up interviews were asked to differentiate between the two resources. Online community networks are developed through existing social networking services, including Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Twitter. In contrast, blogging websites are managed locally on the association's website. In each case, the social networking tools are designed as a grassroots strategy to educate and disseminate information and create discussions on policy issues between associations' staff members, their nonprofit members, and the general public. Surprisingly, online community networks developed through existing social networking services such as Facebook and Twitter are not an ongoing activity employed by the associations, with a rate of use of 2.35 out of 4. Creating a local blogging website ranks even lower in frequency of use with a rating of 2.01 out of 4. Interestingly, both activities received high scores in perceived effectiveness with online community networks through existing services rating 3.27 out of 4 and local blogging websites rating 3.44 out of 4.

Interview participants report that online community networking and blogging are useful lobbying activities in that these communication channels "often go beyond the traditional membership to include nonmembers" and they "allow blogging, which can be a very good way to post updates and get the word out." Another respondent remarks that "blogging can be a very good way to post those updates – What exactly is happening, what are the implications of the various [public policy] proposals." However, contrary to these statements and the survey results indicating high perceived effectiveness of online community networking and blogging, respondents express concern that state nonprofit associations have no way of tracking whether their members or the general public have contacted policymakers on a policy issue as a result of the knowledge gained from state nonprofit associations' online networking or blogging activities. As one respondent explains, "The big question in public policy is – you do a call to action [through Facebook or Twitter] . . . but how many people really respond?" Another respondent notes a different type of problem with social networking activities in that "there may be structural issues as far as who is receiving [the information] whether it be an executive director or the functionary who would be most able to utilize that information."

State nonprofit associations do not routinely measure the outcomes of social networking activities. However, two of the individuals interviewed indicate they are interested in researching methods to measure these types of outcomes. The

fact that effectiveness is difficult to measure does not appear to impact associations' perceptions of online community networking and blogging activities. As one respondent notes, "With respect to social networking, we have an understanding that it's a growing area and we need to be there and we need to develop our skills as we go because there's no time to develop it and then go. So, if we back out of social networking, we'd have a blind spot and it would make it that much more difficult to enter back into later."

Electronic lobbying is already a reality in a subset of nonprofit organizations, though there is at times a disparity in terms of the techniques considered effective and the techniques actually used. This leads one to revisit the question of why perceived effectiveness of electronic lobbying activities that cover a wide audience such as social networking and emailing the general public do not correspond with their rated adoption of use. These methods are considered highly effective, yet they are the least utilized communication channels in this study. This analysis offers two possible explanations. First, as interview respondents note, at this point in time there is no commonly employed method for tracking individuals' efforts to contact policymakers following a call to action from a state nonprofit association's email blast or social networking site. A nonprofit organization's message may be effectively relayed to others via the local website, but the nonprofit has no way of knowing if legislators are being contacted as a result. Even though the message is relayed to the public to some extent, the effectiveness is not demonstrable.

Another explanation that may explain the division between the use and perceived effectiveness of social networking sites is further explained by McNutt's (2008) adaptation of the organizational digital divide, which describes highly tech-savvy, moneyed organizations competing with advocacy groups with scarce resources to devote to technological innovation. Though reaching an entire community with a message has never been "easier" technologically, time, expertise, and staff are still required. Although social networking sites are perceived as effective, some nonprofit organizations may not have the resources, experience, or operating model necessary to take advantage of these types of technological lobbying activities. A researcher or practitioner should be sensitive to these differences in organizations as they seek to empower and educate nonprofit organizations to better represent their constituencies.

There is also an implication in this study regarding nonprofit organizations' communications with the general public. Not surprisingly, nonprofit practitioners' value communicating via email with the public at large, but it is the communication channel that is the least used. There is an obvious hurdle here. The potential for crisis could play its biggest role when an organization extends a call to action on a policy issue to the general public. The crisis of law, as noted

earlier, could stifle an organization's desire to spread its perspective on legislation for fear of jeopardizing its tax-exempt status. By keeping electronic mailings within the membership of the organization or within institutions such as direct emails to policymakers, a nonprofit may be attempting to limit its lobbying influence for fear of losing its tax-exempt status, though perhaps at the price of its constituents' interests.

As illustrated above, it is clear that electronic lobbying is an active, growing, yet underutilized activity of state nonprofit associations. State nonprofit associations employ email and social networking sites to educate and inform their membership, the public, and policymakers on policy issues, but the activity is limited. For nonprofit organizations that lobby, a greater understanding of electronic lobbying activities and a more nuanced perspective on effectiveness of these activities is especially important for the sector to become more influential in the policymaking process.

Conclusions

The results indicate that nonprofit organizations should indeed pursue electronic communication channels as an active lobbying tool. The activities are affordable in most cases, and they enable nonprofit organizations to reach a wide audience. One of the many advantages of the information age is the exponentially greater amount of information available to the public than in previous decades. And though this "democratizing power" (Suárez 2009, 268) may be somewhat of an unrealized prospect, nonprofit organizations are already using this technology with perceived effectiveness, as evidenced in this study, often overcoming substantial organizational limitations.

The need and effectiveness of electronic lobbying outlined here is contingent upon several factors common to, and sometimes unique in, the nonprofit sector. This analysis outlines nonprofit lobbying generally and presents a perspective on limiting social crises specific to the nonprofit sector as a supplemental context for this investigation. Throughout, we endeavor to explain these issues in a way that speaks to the unique challenges facing many nonprofit organizations such as law, ambiguity, resources, training, and constituent needs.

While these results do not solve the two crises discussed earlier – the crisis of terminology and the crisis of law – the study does confirm that nonprofit organizations can indeed work through the ambiguity of these crises in order to represent their constituencies in the policy arena through the use of electronic lobbying activities. If nothing else, these crises of nonprofit lobbying serve as a contextual facet that underscores the need for further research in this area and

illustrates how important and helpful further research into nonprofit lobbying techniques can be.

Further research in this area can take many analytical paths from here. The study of electronic lobbying, especially that which focuses on nonprofit organizations, is still quite lacking. The current study could be expanded to compare differences between lobbying activities of state nonprofit associations and lobbying activities of their nonprofit members. Researchers could also focus on surveying more individuals within specific nonprofit organizations, addressing any potential hierarchical issues. Further examination using a group similar to the National Council of Nonprofits that is itself a collection of associations may give even greater insight into the effects of nonprofit hierarchy on electronic lobbying. Another thread of potential research might focus on public opinion by delving deeper into an examination of the potential digital divide between the public and nonprofit sectors' use of electronic message delivery (of course, the problems of understanding and increasing public participation have been notoriously difficult to address). In addition, researchers could use a framework similar to the one in this study to attempt to capture electronic lobbying activities by nonprofit organizations at different stages in the policy process.

Future research could build on Bergan's (2009) experimental study that looked at New Hampshire's state legislature to examine how emails from activist groups can affect voting patterns. Bergan's study suggests some significant effects of grassroots email lobbying on legislative voting. Perhaps, a future study with the experimental approach of Bergan's work could explore legislators' perceptions of nonprofit electronic lobbying endeavors on a national scale similar to this study. Finally, the study could be replicated with nonprofit organizations that are primarily advocacy organizations. Results from such a study could be compared to the current research with an emphasis on whether a pure advocacy organization's lobbying activities differ significantly from membership organizations that perform a variety of other functions. Regardless of method, technique, or theory, electronic lobbying is an area that needs to be explored much further.

References

- 26 U.S.C. § 501. 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCODE-2011-title26/pdf/USCODE-2011-title26-subtitleA-chap1-subchapF-partI-sec501.pdf>.
- Abramson, A. J., and R. McCarthy. 2002. "Infrastructure Organizations." In *The State of Nonprofit America*, edited by L. M. Salamon, 331–54. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

- Andrews, K. T., and B. Edwards. 2004. "Advocacy Organizations in the U.S. Political Process." *Annual Review of Sociology* 30:479–506.
- Balassiano, K., and S. M. Chandler. 2010. "The Emerging Role of Nonprofit Associations in Advocacy and Public Policy: Trends, Issues, and Prospects." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 39(5):946–55.
- Bergan, D. E. (2009). "Does Grassroots Lobbying Work? A Field Experiment Measuring the Effects of an E-mail Lobbying Campaign on Legislative Behavior." *American Politics Research* 37(2):327–52.
- Berry, J. M. (1997). *The Interest Group Society* (3rd ed.). Menlo Park, CA: Longman.
- Berry, J. M. (2003). "Nonprofit Groups Shouldn't Be Afraid to Lobby." *Chronicle of Philanthropy* 16(4):33–5.
- Brady, H. E., S. Verba, and K. L. Schlozman. 1995. "Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation." *American Political Science Review* 89(2):271–94.
- Child, C., and K. Grønberg. 2007. "Nonprofit Advocacy Organizations: Their Characteristics and Activities." *Social Science Quarterly* 88(1):259–81.
- Fitzgerald, E., and J. McNutt. 1999. "Electronic Advocacy in Policy Practice: A Framework for Teaching Technologically Based Practice." *Journal of Social Work Education* 35(3):331–41.
- Guo, C., and G. D. Saxton. 2010. "Voice-In, Voice-Out: Constituent Participation and Nonprofit Advocacy." *Nonprofit Policy Forum* 1(1):Article 5.
- Hackler, D., and G. D. Saxton. 2007. "The Strategic Use of Information Technology by Nonprofit Organizations: Increasing Capacity and Untapped Potential." *Public Administration Review* 67(3):474–87. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00730.x
- Hudson, B. A., and W. Bielefeld. 1997. "Structures of Multinational Nonprofit Organizations." *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 8(1):31–49.
- Internal Revenue Service. 2013. *Lobbying*. Retrieved from <http://www.irs.gov/Charities-&Non-Profits/Lobbying>.
- Jenkins, J. C. 1987. "Nonprofit Organizations and Policy Advocacy." In *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, edited by W. W. Powell, 296–320. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kingsley, E., G. Harmon, J. Pomeranz, and K. Guinane. 2000. *E-Advocacy for Nonprofits: The Law of Lobbying and Election Related Activity on the Net*. <http://familiesusa2.org/conference/health-action-2011/tool-kit/pdfs/E-Advocacy-for-Nonprofits.pdf>
- Kuhn, T. S. 1996. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LeRoux, K., and H. T. Goerdel. 2009. "Political Advocacy by Nonprofit Organizations: A Strategic Management Explanation." *Public Performance & Management Review* 32(4):514–36. doi: 10.2753/pmr1530-9576320402
- McNutt, J. 2008. "Advocacy Organizations and the Organizational Digital Divide." *Currents: New Scholarship in the Human Services* 7(2):1–16.
- McNutt, J. G., and K. M. Boland. 1999. "Electronic Advocacy by Nonprofit Organizations in Social Welfare Policy." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 28(4):432–51.
- Miller, V. 1994. "NGO and Grassroots Policy Influence: What is Success?" *IDR Reports* 11(5): 2–24.
- National Council of Nonprofits. 2010. Retrieved October 15 from <http://www.councilofnonprofits.org/?q=policy>
- National Council of Nonprofits. 2013. Home. Retrieved from <http://www.councilofnonprofits.org>

- Nicholson-Crotty, J. 2007. "Politics, Policy, and the Motivations for Advocacy in Nonprofit Reproductive Health and Family Planning Providers." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 36(5):5–21.
- Reddick, C. 2012. *Public Administration and Information Technology*. Jones & Bartlett Publishers, Incorporated.
- Rees, S. 1999. "Strategic Choices for Nonprofit Advocates." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Quarterly* 28(1):65–73.
- Salisbury, R. H., and L. Conklin. 1998. "Instrumental versus Expressive Group Politics: The National Endowment for the Arts." In *Interest Group Politics*, edited by A. J. Cigler and B. A. Loomis (5th ed.). Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Schlozman, K. L., S. Verba, and H. E. Brady. 2010. "Weapon of the Strong? Participatory Inequality and the Internet." *Perspectives on Politics* 8(2):487–509.
- Smith, A. 2010. *Home Broadband 2010*. Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project. Retrieved from <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Home-Broadband-2010.aspx>
- Suárez, D. F. 2009. "Nonprofit Advocacy and Civic Engagement on the Internet." *Administration & Society* 41(3):267–89. doi: 10.1177/0095399709332297
- Suárez, D., and H. Hwang. 2008. "Civic Engagement and Nonprofit Lobbying in California, 1998–2003." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 37(1):93–112.
- Vernick, J. 1999. "Lobbying and Advocacy for the Public's Health: What are the Limits for Nonprofit Organizations?" *American Journal of Public Health* 89(9):1425–9.
- Wolpe, B. C., and B. J. Levine. 1996. *Lobbying Congress: How the System Works* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.
- Wyszomirski, M. 1998. "Lobbying Reform and Nonprofit Organizations: Policy Images and Constituent Policy." *Policy Studies Journal* 26(3):512–25.
- Young, D. 2001. "Organizational Identity and the Structure of Nonprofit Umbrella Associations." *Nonprofit Management & Leadership* 11(3):289–304.

