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**GOING ON-LINE FOR CHILDREN: A NATIONAL STUDY OF  
ELECTRONIC ADVOCACY BY NON-PROFIT CHILD  
ADVOCACY AGENCIES**

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**Going On-Line For Children: A National Study of Electronic Advocacy  
by Non-Profit Child Advocacy Agencies**

*John McNutt, William Keaney, Paul Crawford, Lynn Schubert, and Carrie Sullivan*

Advocacy for the rights and welfare of children has been an undying concern of the non-profit sector (Trattner, 1995; Bremner, 1989). This has often meant heroic struggles waged by small organizations with limited budgets. Early advocates used whatever methods were available to them, eventually becoming more sophisticated. Advocacy methodology has changed over time, and many of the newer techniques are based on telecommunications and information technology (McNutt & Boland, 1999; McNutt, 2000a; Turner, 1998). These new techniques, often referred to as electronic advocacy, are adding important new directions to the child advocate's toolbox.

This paper provides the preliminary results of a study of electronic advocacy by a national group of state-level non-profit child advocacy organizations. It seeks to address the following questions: What types of electronic or on-line advocacy techniques are used by state nonprofit child advocacy organizations in their policy change efforts? What types of issues do state nonprofit child advocacy organizations use electronic or on-line advocacy to address? What are the perceived barriers to the use of electronic or on-line advocacy by state nonprofit child advocacy organizations? What factors explain variation among state nonprofit child advocacy organizations in the use of electronic or on-line advocacy techniques?

This research is important for the following reasons: First, as advocates for one of our most vulnerable populations, it is critical that child advocacy organizations use the most effective and efficient methods. Second, devolution has made state level organizations even more critical

in the eventual shape of welfare reform, managed care and child health insurance. Finally, this is a yet unstudied population in the research on electronic advocacy.

## **Review of the Literature**

The use of electronic techniques in political advocacy is a growing phenomenon in the non-profit sector (McNutt, 2000a; McNutt, 2000b). Beginning a decade ago with e-mail based systems (Schwartz, 1996), the practice has grown to include sophisticated web-based systems that incorporate geographic information systems, on-line fundraising and videoconferencing (McNutt & Boland, 2000; Turner, 1998; Zelwietro, 1998). Earlier systems continue to be useful as the leading edge advances to newer and more sophisticated technologies. While there is evidence that the use of these techniques is growing in the sector as a whole, it is still open to question if they will have an impact on individual subsectors such as child advocacy.

### Theoretical Framework

Since these questions largely pertain to adoption of a set of technologies by organizations, diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 1995; Norris, 1999; Strang & Soule, 1998; Brancheau & Wetherbe, 1990) is an appropriate explanatory theory. Rogers argues that an innovation will be communicated through a series of successive population groups through networks and internal opinion leaders. Rogers (1995) predicts that organizational characteristics and innovation characteristics will determine the likelihood of adoption. While a complete discussion of this approach is not possible here, the theory predicts that innovations that demonstrate relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability will be most likely to be adopted. This means that the less sophisticated, tried and true technologies (such as e-mail, fax and simple web-based approaches) will be more likely to be adopted. The theory specifies a number of organizational characteristics such as size, structure, leader

characteristics, centralization, formalization, interconnectedness, slack resources and system openness that Rogers argues are largely subsumed by size. The strength of an organization's network (consultants and relationships with other groups), freedom from internal and external barriers as well as the centrality of advocacy to the organization (policy effort) round out the list of predictors. These generalizations can be formalized into a set of hypotheses:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Child Advocacy Organizations will be more likely to have implemented those techniques that present the following characteristics: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability*

*H<sub>2</sub>: Child Advocacy Organizations will be more likely to plan to implement those techniques that present the following characteristics: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability*

*H<sub>3</sub>: Child Advocacy Organizations that have larger staffs, use a consultant, have observed electronic advocacy in other groups, perceive electronic advocacy as effective, have fewer organizational barriers and devote more effort to policy change will be more likely to use a wider range of electronic advocacy techniques.*

*H<sub>4</sub>: Child Advocacy Organizations that have larger staffs, use a consultant, have observed electronic advocacy in other groups, perceive electronic advocacy as effective, have fewer organizational barriers and devote more effort to policy change will be more likely to plan a wider range of electronic advocacy techniques*

## **Methodology**

This is a cross sectional study of organizations engaged in child advocacy work. The principle variables examined were methods used, barriers, perceived effectiveness, perceived use by other groups, use of a consultant and staff size.

The subject pool were member organizations of a National Association of Child Advocates (N=62) and the list was obtained from the organization's website.

A self-administered questionnaire was developed from instruments in similar studies. It was pre-tested and revised. Each respondent was sent a cover letter, the questionnaire, a support letter and a return envelope. Follow up letters, e-mail messages and telephone calls facilitated returns.

## Results

A total of 46 usable questionnaires were returned. One organization responded that they were in the developmental stages and could not participate. They were dropped from the sample for a final tally of 61. This is a response rate of 75%, which is generally considered excellent. There was a modest amount of missing data.

Organizational Characteristics: These are predominantly small organizations. Most (54.5%) are not membership organizations. The median number of professional and support staff is small (7.0). Within this general pattern, there is considerable variation with one organization having 32 staff positions and two others with only two positions. Table 1 presents this information. Some of the organizations have members and some have volunteers.

Time Spent on Policy Work: Respondents were asked how much staff time was spent on advocacy work. The results were 25% or less (17.82%), 26-50% (13.3%), 51-75% (26.7%) and 76-100% (42.2%). This demonstrates considerable policy involvement by this group, as might be expected.

Electronic Advocacy Techniques Used: Tables 2-5 present the reported results in current and planned adoption of electronic advocacy techniques. There is relatively uniform use of the less sophisticated technologies, particularly e-mail based techniques and telephone/fax based techniques. The exceptions are fax on demand, chat and newsgroups. Most of the organizations

have a website or are planning to develop one. There is less use of the more sophisticated technologies. Only one agency reports having videoteleconferencing, six have a secure Intranet and only four have Geographic Information Systems.

Perceived Use by Other Groups: Respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which local groups were using electronic advocacy. The mean of 5.0395 with a relatively small standard deviation of 1.6373 suggests that respondents were aware of other groups using the techniques. There is a moderate amount of missing data on this variable.

Perceived Effectiveness: Respondents were also asked how effective the techniques were on a seven point scale with seven being "Highly Effective". The mean effectiveness ranking was 4.6250 with a standard deviation of 2.0716, which suggests reasonably high support for the effectiveness of electronic advocacy techniques. There is a moderate amount of missing data on this variable.

Most Often Used and Most Effective Techniques: E-Mail was the technique reported used and effective. This was followed by telephone and fax technologies. Far fewer listed the use of a website or any of the advanced technologies. Quite a few respondents (15) did not answer the question.

Policy Arenas: Respondents were given a range of policy areas and asked if they used electronic advocacy techniques to address these issues. As Table 6 shows, child health was the most frequently mentioned arena, followed by early childhood education, day care and child protective services. The least frequently mentioned areas were purchase of services contracting and child support. It should be mentioned that the question speaks to the use of electronic advocacy and does not necessarily reflect the advocacy priorities of the responding organizations.

Barriers: Respondents were asked to identify barriers to their electronic advocacy efforts. The principle barriers reported were expertise (69.6%), expense (63%) and equipment (43.5%). Few respondents identified awareness, universal access or resistance as barriers. Table 7 provides this information.

Consultants and Internal Expertise: Respondents were asked if their organization employed an internal technology person and if the organization used a consultant. Most (58.7%) of the respondents used a consultant and most (54.3%) had an internal technology person. There did not appear to be a pattern of substituting consultants for internal technology staff.

Regression Analysis: Table 8 presents the zero-order correlations between the predictor variables and the two dependent variables. There are relatively strong relationships between perceived barriers and staff size and current use. The relationships between planned use and the predictors are all weak.

Two regression models were fitted (see Table 9), one for current use and the other for planned use. The results for current use show moderate explanatory power. The  $R$  (.609),  $R^2$  (.371) and adjusted  $R^2$  (.226) were all of reasonable size. Staff size and perceived effectiveness have the largest standardized regression coefficients, suggesting their importance to the prediction. The results for planned use are less positive. The  $R$  (.335) and  $R^2$  (.112) are very small and the F-Test is not significant. None of the standardized regression coefficients have a significant t-value. This seems to suggest that there is a relationship between the predictors and current use, but not planned use.

Discussion: The organizations that are described in this research represent a national group of advocates for children. As a group, they report being highly involved in policy work. All have

reported use of electronic advocacy techniques. They use these techniques on a variety of current children's issues.

*H<sub>1</sub>: Child Advocacy Organizations will be more likely to have implemented those techniques that present the following characteristics: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability*

*H<sub>2</sub>: Child Advocacy Organizations will be more likely to plan to implement those techniques that present the following characteristics: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability*

These two hypotheses were supported by the results. As a group, these organizations report wide use of e-mail, telephone and fax technologies and beginning use of web-based technologies. This is reflected in both the techniques used by the organizations and those considered effective. More sophisticated technologies are not often used. This is consistent with previous studies (McNutt & Boland, 1999; 2000) and with Rogers' (1995) theoretical constructs.

It should be noted that this is, in general, a fairly sophisticated group. All of the organizations make significant use of these advocacy technologies. Several of the organizations appear to be among the leading edge in electronic advocacy.

*H<sub>3</sub>: Child Advocacy Organizations that have larger staffs, use a consultant, have observed electronic advocacy in other groups, perceive electronic advocacy as effective, have fewer organizational barriers and devote more effort to policy change will be more likely to use a wider range of electronic advocacy techniques.*

*H<sub>4</sub>: Child Advocacy Organizations that have larger staffs, use a consultant, have observed electronic advocacy in other groups, perceive electronic advocacy as effective, have fewer*

*organizational barriers and devote more effort to policy change will be more likely to plan a wider range of electronic advocacy techniques*

The regression results support the relationship between the predictors and current use, but not planned use. The most likely explanation for this is that most of the respondents reported planning for very few technologies. The degree of technological penetration in this group is impressive and, while the leading edge is always advancing, this group of organizations might be considered among the most sophisticated.

In the discussion of organizational barriers, the pattern is similar to earlier research (McNutt & Boland, 1999; 2000). Expertise is, far and away, the critical barrier. This is especially interesting given that many of the organizations in this group have both access to a consultant and an internal technology person. While some of this speaks to rapidly changing state of technology, it is also indicative of the need for more technology supports in the nonprofit sector (Greene, 2001). While the nonprofit sector has begun to organize to meet its technology needs, considerable progress is needed to make technology a part of nonprofit practice. The other major variables, expense and equipment, are not surprising given the small size of many of these organizations. Funding for technology is often difficult in the face of other priorities.

This study provides reasonably good support for Rogers (1995) diffusion of innovation theory. The adoption of predicted technologies is generally consistent with the theory and the regression results for current use are consistent with the theory's predictions.

This study should be considered in light of its limitations. While the response rate is relatively high by current standards, a quarter of the organizations did not respond. There are also the usual issues with survey research such as social desirability effect, misunderstood

questions. Because of the small number of cases, the regression results should be seen as heuristic in nature.

This study points the way to other research that is needed in this area. More in-depth studies of organizational issues and process are needed. These might focus on how organizations decide to adopt these technologies and how they actually use them in practice. It also suggests that complementary studies of national child advocacy organizations are needed. Major policies for children's issues are still made at the national level and information on the use of electronic tools by these organizations is essential to our continued understanding of the phenomenon.

The plight of children in American society is a serious and continuing concern. This study has demonstrated that the organizations that are fighting for our children are using technology in their efforts. Hopefully this will result in the creation of a better world for all children.

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## Child Advocacy Tables and Figures

**Table 1: Staff Reported Classified by Status**

Status	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
FT Professional	0	14	5.2559	4.0	3.6259
PT Professional	0	9	1.4186	1.0	1.8801
FT Support	0	26	1.5581	1.0	4.0137
PT Support	0	4	.7558	0	.9721

**Table 2: Use of E-Mail and Telephone Based Techniques Reported**

Technique	No Plans		Have		Planned	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
E-Mail for Internal Coordination	4	(8.7)	41	(89.1)	1	(2.2)
E-Mail for External Coordination	4	(9.1)	34	(77.3)	6	(13.6)
Discussion Lists	15	(33.3)	15	(33.3)	15	(33.3)
E-Mail to Decision-Makers	6	(13.3)	27	(60)	12	(26.7)
Newsgroups	31	(68.9)	8	(17.8)	6	(13.3)
Internet Relay Chat	36	(80)	2	(4.4)	7	(15.6)
Distribution List	11	(23.9)	30	(65.2)	5	(10.9)

**Table 3: Organizations Reporting Use of Simple Web-based Technologies**

Technique	No Plans		Have		Planned	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
WebPages	1	(2.2)	39	(86.7)	5	(11.1)
Legislative Information on the Web page	22	(47.8)	15	(32.6)	9	(19.6)
Case Studies on the Webpage	36	(80.0)	6	(13.3)	3	(6.7)
Statistics on the Webpage	4	(8.7)	33	(71.7)	9	(19.6)
Links to Policy Sites on Webpage	5	(10.9)	30	(65.2)	11	(23.9)

Advocacy Information	14 (30.4)	18 (39.1)	14 (30.4)
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Table percent values do not always agree due to missing data

**Table 4: Organizations Reporting Use of Advanced Web-based Technologies**

Technique	No Plans		Have		Planned	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
On-Line Fundraising	21 (45.7)		10 (21.7)		15 (32.6)	
Secure Site	28 (60.9)		5 (10.9)		13 (28.3)	
Shopping Related	32 (69.6)		5 (10.9)		9 (19.6)	
On-Line Survey	29 (63)		5 (10.9)		12 (26.1)	
Volunteer Recruitment	27 (58.7)		9 (19.6)		10 (21.7)	
Banner Advertisements	34 (75.6)		4 (8.9)		7 (15.6)	
Streaming Video	40 (87)		2 (4.3)		4 (8.7)	
Intranet	33 (71.7)		6 (13)		7 (15.2)	

Table percent values do not always agree due to missing data

**Table 5: Use of Miscellaneous Techniques Reported organizations**

Technique	No Plans		Have		Planned	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Geographic Information System	30 (65.2)		4 (8.7)		12 (26.1)	
Teleconferencing	40 (87)		1 (2.2)		5 (10.9)	
Standard Fax	4 (8.7)		41 (89.1)		1 (2.2)	
Broadcast Fax	7 (15.2)		34 (73.9%)		5 (10.9)	
Fax on Demand	35 (76.1)		7 (15.2)		4 (8.7)	

Policy Web Sites for Policy Research	13 (28.3)	29 (63)	4 (8.7)
Policy Discussion Lists for Policy Research	11 (23.9)	30 (65.2)	5 (10.9)
Conference Call	10 (21.7)	35 (76.1)	1 (2.2)

Table percent values do not always agree due to missing data

**Table Six: Reported Policy Arenas**

Arena	N	%	Arena	N	%
Managed Care	16	34.8	Child Health Care	37	80.4
Family Preservation	16	34.8	Youth Violence		
Foster Care and Adoption	21	46.7	Child Support Enforcement	8	17.4
Juvenile Justice	25	54.3	Purchase of Services Contracting and Privatization	6	13
Child Protective Services	24	52.2	Educational Support Services	15	32.6
Welfare Reform	32	69.6	Family Support Services	22	47.8
Early childhood education	35	77.8			
Daycare	28	60.9			

**Table 7: Reported Barriers to Implementation**

Barrier	N	%
Expertise	32	69.6
Expense	29	63
Equipment	20	43.5
Access (Universal)	13	28.3
Awareness	8	17.4
External Resistance	5	10.9
Internal Resistance	2	4.3
Management Approval	2	4.3
Staff Resistance	2	4.3

**Table 8: Zero-Order Correlations**

	Policy Effort	Consult	Effect	Current Use	Other Group Use	Staff	Barriers	Planned Use
Policy Effort	1.00							
Consult	-.008	1.00						
Effect	.201	-.050	1.00					
Current Use	-.181	.145	.157	1.00				
Other Group Use	-.023	-.013	.072	-.175	1.00			
Staff	.002	.303	-.099	.410**	.106	1.00		
Barriers	.115	.126	.100	.347*	-.013	.281	1.00	
Planned Use	.197	.023	.007	-.227	.160	-.044	-.040	1.00

Regression Coefficients

Coefficient	Current Use	Planned Use
R	.609	.335
R <sup>2</sup>	.371	.112
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.226	-.092
F	2.55      P=.044	.549      P=.766

	Current Use		Planned Use	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
(Constant)		.005		.264
Perceived Barriers	.154	.359	.010	.962
Consultant Effectiveness	-.006	.972	.035	.860
Other Group Use	.357	.035	-.076	.692
Staff Size	-.202	.217	.145	.454
Time Spent on Policy	.374	.042	-.338	.115
	-.259	.115	-.004	.984