Chapter 4  A step beyond: Technologically enhanced interactivity and legitimacy

Corien Prins

1. Introduction

Picture a future world where many of the online tools that children now have at their fingertips are used powerfully by NGOs to advocate and campaign in challenging new ways. In such a world, NGOs are actively engaged in educating the general public via virtual games. Based on their earlier successes with e-commerce applications, NGOs apply recommender systems to signal correlations in societal perceptions by making links between two or more political views based on user feedback through their websites.¹ Instant messaging and weblogs will by then have become routine instruments in creating awareness, trying out certain ideas, coalition building and bringing relevant information to the attention of international organizations. This is a world in which the strategies employed by NGOs are to a large extent determined by the opportunities new digital tools offer.

¹ Recommender systems are gaining popularity in the e-commerce domain. One example is an application available for users on the Internet called MovieLens, where visitors can obtain movie recommendations based on ratings by website visitors, but also rate or review any movie themselves and recommend these to others, or share movie recommendations in discussion groups. Mobile location based services through cell-phones are currently also available. For instance, people with similar preferences within the same geographical perimeter of approximately 30 metres. For more details on these applications, see Mobasher, Bamshad, Robert Cooley, and Jaideep Srivastava (2000) Automatic Personalization Based on Web Usage Mining. Web usage mining can help improve the scalability, accuracy, and flexibility of recommender systems. Communications of the ACM. Association for Computer Machinery 43, no.8: 142-151.

At first glance, this scenario may seem a little far-fetched. Today, true technology-amplified action by NGOs is a far from common scenario. The majority of these organizations have not yet moved beyond the use of websites and e-mail, and have not yet learned or noticed the capabilities, value, and strategic potential of the new interactive digital tools described above. But the tools are in fact at their disposal. All applications and techniques mentioned are already being used or applied by other actors in the online world, both for commercial and public purposes. What is more, some of the tools mentioned are indeed part of the present-day strategy of some NGOs. So why would NGOs and other social movements in, say, ten years, not broadly benefit from these new opportunities? One way or another, once NGOs start to experiment with ways to use these tools, and the knowledge of their strategic potential has had sufficient time to mature, they will no doubt serve as increasingly important instruments in the work, role and influence of NGOs. This raises questions about the accountability for the use of these tools and the available formal and informal checks on such use. And, when focusing on this book’s central theme—the legitimacy of NGOs—it may be presumed that a more intensive reliance on digital strategies could have an effect on several of the dimensions that constitute legitimacy. But what exactly will this effect be? Below, a glimpse of the potential impact of interactive digital tools on NGOs and their legitimacy will be presented.

In discussing the questions raised above, this chapter starts from the presumption that the discourse environment in which NGOs operate has an effect on the legitimacy issue and the three legitimacy dimensions (to be discussed below). In applying this perspective, this chapter aims to explore what the new interactive digital tools might mean for legitimacy and on what basis such tools could develop contributions to the (understanding of the) concept of legitimacy and its dimensions. The exploration partly builds on the research results presented in Chapter 3 of this book. However, whereas that chapter focused on websites and on the information and services provided through websites, this chapter’s perspective is interactive digital tools. By way of example, two applications mentioned above will be elaborated on: simulation games and personalized information distribution. Section 2 will consider the opportunities these new tools may offer NGOs to pursue their objectives and exercise their influence. In Section 3, the discussion will then turn to the possible implications of the employment of new interactive tools. More specifically, the legitimacy issue will be focused on. Digital