

# Re-examining the relationship between civil society and the internet: Pessimistic visions in India's 'IT City'

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## Abstract

The paper critically re-examines some assumptions associated with the internet-civil society relationship, viz., that intertwining online and offline activity furthers democratic goals, and the willingness of civil society actors to effectively utilize the internet. A case study of *Hasiru Usiru*, an internet-based civil society network in Bangalore, India, unearthed intense scepticism towards, and refusal to engage deeply with, the internet for activism. The paper examines the reasons for the propagation of a pessimistic view by wired civil society actors situated in a new media-intensive environment, viz., the 'IT City' of India. The finding that working within the context of a technologizing city need not result in greater internet use by civil society is a departure from the prominent view of the internet as furthering the democratic cause of civil society.

## Keywords:

Bangalore; civil society; internet; activism; cyber/techno-pessimism

## Introduction

The central themes in this paper relate to a re-examination of the relationship between civil society and the internet, particularly the assumption regarding civil society's willingness and ability to embrace the internet in its democratic quest. By enhancing networking opportunities among disparate civic groups and social movements, the internet is said to facilitate mobilization and greater collective action (Bennet, 2003; Carty, 2010, 2011; Castells, 2002; Van De Donk, Loader, Nixon, and Rucht, 2004). The increasing proficiency with which civic groups channel the internet for activism is also often touted as proof of the internet's democratic credentials.

The underlying assumptions of this approach appear to be firstly, that the intertwining of online and offline activity furthers democratic goals (Carty, 2010; Hayhtio & Rinne, 2008; Jensen, Danziger, & Venkatesh, 2007). The second assumption is the willingness of civil society actors to adopt an increasingly affordable and accessible internet in pursuance of these goals (see Dilevko, 2002). Such taken-for-granted notions are critically re-examined in light of fieldwork conducted in Bangalore city, India in 2011-2012; where the study of internet-based network *Hasiru Usiru* revealed intense scepticism towards, and refusal to engage deeply with, the internet for activism.

Meaning 'greenery is life', *Hasiru Usiru* comprises concerned citizens and groups working to protect urban greenery and other urban commons, and functions largely through an email list of almost 900 members<sup>1</sup>. The pessimistic attitude towards the internet by the 'core group' of active members is discussed in terms of Pippa Norris' (2001) concept of cyber-pessimism. The pessimistic vision of the internet that emerges from this case study goes against the grain of the mostly celebratory views of the

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<sup>1</sup> As of June 23, 2013 the e-group membership of *Hasiru Usiru* was 858 (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/HasiruUsiru/>).

civil society-internet relationship. Further, the negative view is propagated by actors who are regular internet users, and who are situated in an environment of information/internet availability, viz., the ‘IT City’ of India. The paper focuses on the paradoxical situation wherein activists who are regular (and even savvy) internet users refuse to strategically utilize the internet in an ‘IT rich’ city. In examining this apparent dichotomy, the paper delves into the reasons for the critical attitude towards the internet, and the conditions under which civil society actors refuse to engage with it for activism.

### **Theoretical underpinnings and method**

Optimistic and pessimistic predictions of the role of new technologies in social and political life have typically focused on individual self-realization, work and economic enterprise, community, and democracy (see Kling, 1996; Winner, 1997). While modern technology-focused imaginings can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Segal, 1985; Winner, 1997), in the current period, advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), especially the internet, have produced their own, specific techno-optimistic and –pessimistic imaginations (A.G.M van Dijk, 2012; Barnard, 2012; Carty, 2010; Fisher & Wright, 2001; Hindman, 2009; Howcroft & Fitzgerald, 1998). This paper discusses attitudes towards the internet in terms of Pippa Norris’ (2001, p.11) tripartite framework, wherein the various predictions surrounding the democratic potential of the internet are categorized in terms of cyber-optimists, cyber-pessimists, and cyber-skeptics.

*Hasiru Usiru* was chosen as a case study (Yin, 2003) by dint of its active online space, its increasingly prominent role in the city’s public sphere and cyberspace, and its linkages with other civil society groups and government actors. The primary method of data collection was in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews (Kvale, 1996), supplemented by unstructured observation (Nørskov & Rask, 2011) of mailing list discussions, observations in the field, as well as other secondary data sources. The emphasis on qualitative interviewing follows the rationale that as online engagement entails multi-site communications, what is communicated online may be different from what is communicated offline by the same person or organization (Soriano, 2012). In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 active members and external actors familiar with the network, of which six were core group members. Interview data was analyzed by qualitative thematic analysis, which enabled the identification of recurring themes and salient issues across the dataset (Boyatzis, 1998; Howitt and Cramer, 2005; Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

### **Main findings**

The analysis revealed that pessimistic attitudes towards the internet by core group members clustered around four main themes, viz.:

1. **The internet as exclusionary:** The internet was seen as a limited realm working in the interests of the middle and higher-income classes that had unrestricted access to it. At the heart of the elitist conception of the internet lay an anxiety regarding the exacerbation of existing divides between the (information) rich and poor, particularly related to public participation in policy-making and other democratic actions.
2. **The internet as amplifier:** Negative attitudes towards the internet were further perpetuated by the core group’s assumption that the internet worked as what Agre (2002) and Toyama (2011) term an “amplifier”. They suggest that technology can have both positive and negative impacts as it merely amplifies underlying human and institutional intent and capacity<sup>2</sup>. Hence, the situation wherein the internet is more useful to those who are already connected to (a variety of) media than those who are not, reinforces the situation of information imbalance.

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<sup>2</sup> See Rao (2012) for implications of this model with regard to civil society groups working on the right to information movement in India.

3. **The lack of conversion from online to offline collective action:** The pessimistic attitude of the core group towards the internet is also related to the steady decline in response to calls for protest amongst e-group members. Unsuccessful efforts at mobilization towards collective actions deepened the disillusionment of the core group with the internet community.
4. **The internet as realm of ideas, not action:** Whereas the internet was viewed as a critical source of information, this did not extend to its role as a medium to facilitate collective action on the ground. The concern that minimum-level engagement on the internet subverts real efforts to initiate change, as well as the emphasis on physical engagement by government and other stakeholders, contributed to doubts about the ability of online action to produce change.

The perception of the internet, and its utility for concerted civic action, varied to a large extent between the core and non-core or e-group members. Attitudes among the e-group - most of who were connected to the network solely through the mailing list - ranged from cyber-skepticism to –optimism, with a cautious recognition of strengths and weaknesses of networked activism.

### **Conclusion:**

The paper has shown that the core group of active members in *Hasiru Usiru* view the internet's role in the network's activities in a pessimistic or sceptical light. The negative lens is both due to, and responsible for, the emphasis on physical participation and a sense of offline community. Interviews revealed that this pessimistic vision originates in a shared political (largely left-leaning or socialist) philosophy that the actors informally refer to as their "ideology". Moreover, failures of earlier mobilization attempts have stymied subsequent efforts to creatively and strategically use the internet for activism. The reluctance to engage with the internet highlights that working within the context of a technologizing city does not necessarily result in greater internet use by civil society. The rejection or refusal of the internet by civil society actors, based on skeptical and pessimistic perceptions of the medium, challenges earlier assumptions of the uncritical acceptance of new technologies - with implications for future studies of civil society in an information age.

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