

# ICT Practices by Voluntary Groups: A Multi-Setting Study

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## Abstract

This poster describes my interdisciplinary doctoral research on information and communication technologies (ICTs) and voluntary sector organizations (VSOs). Despite the fact that ICTs proliferate within these organizations, the literature on the relationships between such technologies and voluntary contexts is scant in comparison to private and public domains. In particular, it is not clear how the specific characteristics of volunteers might affect the take-up and use of ICTs. Using the language and concerns of sociology of technology and by focusing on socio-technical dynamics of everyday ICTs practices, my research seeks to explore and conceptualize the ways such practices are constituted, maintained and re-produced by multiple actors and settings. The emerging themes of the research show that high turnover of volunteers and their different levels of engagement in VSOs shape the ICT-related practices. This poster also identifies the contribution of the study.

*Keywords:* voluntary sector organizations, information and communication technologies, organising practices, social actors, distributed settings

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## Introduction and Literature Review

Voluntary Sector Organizations (VSOs) serve different roles in society through self-governing mechanisms and also voluntary activities (Kendall, 2003). VSOs, like other business firms and public sector organizations, are also welcoming ICT innovations to respond to the increasing challenges of the sector such as competition for funding and volunteers [Burt & Taylor, 2000]. This increases the proliferation of ICTs in the sector and hence there is a growing consensus that we need to study ICTs and VSOs [Pereira & Cullen, 2009], in particular because such technologies alter the ways people organize their work activities [Orlikowski & Barley, 2001].

Scholars, mostly with a background in VSO fields, have provided valuable insights into the reasons of VSOs failure in reaping the benefits of ICTs (e.g. Hackler & Saxton, 2007). In addition, their studies have suggested some of organizational consequences for implementing such innovations (e.g. Burt & Taylor, 2003). However, there are still conceptual and methodological inadequacies within the current literature. The challenges associated with the 'Deterministic View on ICTs' and 'Single Setting Research Design' are two less-considered areas. This provides space for further studies in this area like the proposed research.

Many ICT-related VSO studies seek to explore and to theorize the impacts of technological innovations on organizations as well as to determine factors which influence processes of technology adoption and use in VSOs. Such deterministic views have not considered the co-evolution of technology and organization and hence the possibility of dual effects of technology on organizational activities is not well-understood. (e.g. Hart, 2002; Zhang & Gutierrez, 2007).

In terms of research design, the unit of analysis for studies on ICTs in VSOs has varied from individual level of analysis [Zhang & Gutierrez, 2007] to organizational [Hackler & Saxton, 2007] and to national level [Malina & Ball, 2005]. However, there is a lack of multi-level analyses that could investigate the dynamics and perhaps the mutual impacts of different actors on each other across and within VSOs. Moreover, a number of these research inquiries are also ill-contextualized.

These inquires have attempted to re-use other technology studies knowledge in VSO domain by conducting statistically-informed surveys which explore the demographics of technology adoption and use (c.f. Iverson & Burkart, 2007).

Therefore, this research aims to explore ICT-related practices within the specific context of VSOs through an interdisciplinary research, including Science and Technology Studies (contexts), Organization Studies (practices), Computer-Supported Collaboration Work (interactions), Information Systems Research (artifacts), and more importantly Social Informatics (dynamics). The broad research question that this study tackles is: "How everyday ICT practices are constructed, maintained and reshaped in smaller voluntary organizations?"

This study narrows the scope of VSOs to those ones that rely heavily on voluntarism, though other VSOs may be better explained through other characteristics such as being non-profit making/distributing. Considering the short-term nature of doctoral studies, this research focuses on exploring the case of small scale VSOs. This gives the researcher an opportunity to build a richer picture of the object of study which is "everyday ICT-related practices" by voluntary groups. This means that this research offers a basis to find out the ways through which the voluntary nature of work affects the take-up and then the use of ICTs in organizing practices by volunteers.

## Research Methodology and Theoretical Approach

As discussed earlier, the current literature on VSOs and ICTs leaves the technology as a black-box. By formulating a 'how' question, this study seeks to explore what happens inside the 'black-box'. In doing so, initially, an in-depth ethnographic case study of a leading Scottish swimming club was designed to shed light on the use of ICTs by volunteers, in particular by applying the insight of the mainstream CSCW studies and IS research. However, during the earlier stages of the fieldwork, a fundamental emergent issue has arisen: people of the case study were pointing to other actors and settings beyond the case when they were being asked about their everyday work practices. This was also supported by further observations during their work with a range of ICTs. For instance, a new sports software vendor has come into the market and some people in the club were under-exploiting the functionalities of the current software with a hope to the procurement of the new system.

This issue might not be a matter of single case study; rather it seemed that its roots were in focusing on volunteers' use of ICTs within a single setting, which was the club setting. The emergent issue, i.e. the flags made by volunteers, has encouraged me to start conversations with more diverse communities to establish an appropriated theoretical basis. This provides more insights into the research focus through different concepts such sociomaterial practices [Suchman, 2007], affordances [Bloomfield et al., 2010], entanglement [Barad 2003]. Among these, the Social Actor Model (Lamb and Kling 2003) provides a useful insight with regard to the nature of research problem. Through this model, Lamb and Kling argue that atomistic views of technology users are problematic and instead they call for a re-conceptualization of how the user is understood. They suggest that an organizational member is not just a user; he/she is a Social Actor whose interactions are enabled and perhaps constrained by a number of other external and internal entities. Using a socio-technical approach, this model seeks to explore and explain how these entities alter the use of ICTs within organizational contexts. In doing so, they characterize four ICT-related dimensions of a social actor: affiliations, environments, interactions and identities.

Using their broad and open-ended dimensions and considering the emerging voice on the significance of materiality of technological artifacts, this research seeks to conceptualize volunteers (and other VSOs members) as social actors which their practices of ICTs are not just shaped by a specific kind of technology within a limited workplace. Instead, to study such practices, we need to go beyond the boundaries of the case and also to take into account other human or non-human actors. Hence, it seems that the previous 'flat ethnographic' case study [Williams & Pollock, 2009] should be completed with other techniques to generate data and make sense of more distributed contexts [Monteiro et al. 2012].

As a result, this research has three pathways: first, the idea to study volunteers as users of technology in a limited setting is problematic; second, it has been argued that users are social actors that their ICTs practices are shaped by diverse internal and external entities; third, a multi-setting study is required to capture all significant key players and contexts which affect the patterns of ICTs practices. This research therefore studies both the club level and other distributed settings and actors which they are being emerged through snowballing techniques.

## Preliminary Findings and Future Contributions

Within six months of ethnographic fieldwork at the club level, two central themes have been emerged. For the first theme, the generated data suggests that since the club's volunteers are different, those who have more time to offer may also have more power to shape the general pattern of ICTs use. In particular, if a key actor decides not to use a collaborative technology, that technological system would probably fail. The second theme is based on the issues and challenges surrounding the high turnover of volunteers in smaller scale VSOs. This 'coming-and-going' has led to many of workarounds as people have more freedom to choose from portfolio of available technologies.

The fieldwork has also revealed other distributed settings, people and non-humans which have an influence on the club's ICTs practices. This includes a national governing body for swimming, an online intermediary which coordinates and regulates all Scottish swimming competitions, independent practitioners and two software vendors. The future plan for the study is to continue with the ethnographic data collection from the club (shadowing, observations and talks) as well as to generate further insights into the distributed actors/settings (official reports, interviews and online materials).

This research is expected to contribute in three main domains. Firstly, consistent with the calls for multi-locale technology studies (c.f. Koch, 2007; Pollock & Williams, 2010), this research generates insights into the role of distributed contexts of ICTs practices. Secondly, although this research is informed theoretically by the social actor model, it extends the model through the application and modifications needed for the context of small VSOs (c.f. [Lamb 2005]). Finally, the study is expected to support policy-makers and practitioners in (re)defining their ICTs plans/programs.

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