



THE ONLINE SOCIAL ECONOMY

Where is it? And how does it work?

Social Economy Fact Sheet #30

By **Sherida Ryan, Ph.D.**, Ontario
Institute for Studies in Education,
University of Toronto

sherida.ryan@utoronto.ca

Birds' Eye View

Canadians with Internet: 72%
Households with Internet: 64%
Canadian Internet users (16-24 years):
94%
Internet users involved in online
commerce: 66%

Nonprofit Online Pioneers:

<http://www.ifex.org>
<http://www.indymedia.org>
<http://www.charityvillage.com>

Examples worldwide:

- Networking tool: Facebook
- 3D virtual world: Second Life
- Non-profit enterprise: Wikipedia
- Online donation: GiveMeaning

Preliminary results in Ontario:

- Dev./housing (17 groups)
- Advocacy and politics (17)
- Culture and recreation (11)
- Education and research (4)
- Social services (9)
- Environment (5)
- Philanthropy (4)
- Health (3)
- International (2)
- Associations and unions (1)
- Unclassified (1)

Because of the increased presence of Internet-based technology in everyday life and the mainstream success of online advocacy organizations such as MoveOn.org and the World Wildlife Fund, many nonprofits are beginning to take to the web. These organizations are using the Internet to promote their mission, to enhance their fundraising and to communicate efficiently with their members. In this baseline study, OISE researcher Sherida Ryan establishes some basic categories and definitions, and offers a fascinating look at some of the pioneers that are making the social economy happen, online.

Online social enterprises in Ontario: Five examples

Toronto Social Purchasing Portal

A Social Purchasing Portal (SPP) is an Internet-based service that uses an online database to connect socially responsible companies with local businesses that employ people who need support to make it in the workforce. Purchasers can search the database, by type of goods or services, and by location. The search produces a list of vendors that match the purchaser's criteria and provides more in-depth information.

The goal is to make social purchasing part of the local culture. Face-to-face interaction is important in the development phase, but Internet-based technology is vital to meet the portal's goals.

We used a broad, inclusive definition of the social economy, focusing on organizations with a strong social mission; social ownership; volunteer participation; and member engagement.

Ontario Women's Health Network

A provincial non-profit, the Ontario Women's Health Network (OWHN) works to give voice to women's health issues. OWHN's website provides a directory of services so that women can find health resources close to home. It also publishes a weekly e-digest and a quarterly e-Bulletin. Although the Internet cannot be accessed by all women in need, the OWHN employs the medium as the cheapest way to provide many women with the health resource information they need.

Torontothebetter

Libra Knowledge and Information Services Co-op Inc., a unionized workers' coop, created Torontothebetter.net, the city's first online progressive business directory. The goal of this enterprise is informed shopping based on personal principles, helping people put their money where their values are. Internet-based technology is also employed to communicate with members and to assess the credibility and trustworthiness of the businesses they support.

Methods

Research methods used in this study included:

- Search engines
- Key informants
- Snowball sampling
- Text analysis
- In-depth interviews with leaders of five enterprises.

Website categories reflected the depth of participation offered:

1. **Brochure:** staking a claim (least participation)
2. **Magazine:** one-way information
3. **Direct appeal:** surveys and online forms
4. **Community:** website's capacity to support member interaction and content creation. (most participation), often includes multimedia

Findings for each category

1. Brochure: 16% of websites
2. Magazine: 23%
3. Direct Appeal: 28%
4. Community: 31%, and growing

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Editor: Lake Sagaris

Design: Laurie Mook
sec@oise.utoronto.ca

<http://socialeconomy.utoronto.ca>

DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) Ontario

Formed in 1992, the DisAbled Women's Network Ontario (DAWN) is a totally volunteer, feminist organization that advocates inclusion and equality for women and girls with disabilities. DAWN uses the internet to support education, research, resource development, capacity building and knowledge sharing.

The website includes online discussion forums where members share information, support, and build their capacity for self-advocacy. It also offers a Media Kit, an Advocacy Tool Kit, a Disability Access Checklist, a Virtual Activist Training Reader and a Violence Against Women section

Most importantly, in the words of one of DAWN's members

The new world that had opened for us via online online activism was incredibly empowering and for the first time, many of us felt like we were contributing to a great causehelping in some small way to work to positively affect social change.



Kuhkenah Network

Kuhkenah Network (K-Net) is a communications initiative of Keewatinook Okimakanak (KO), a nonprofit, non-political, tribal chiefs council representing First Nations in northwestern Ontario. It provides telecommunication infrastructure, services, training and support to remote communities, some of which can only be reached by small aircraft.

K-Net supports chat rooms and individual websites, band office programs and promotion of Aboriginal arts, crafts, and culture. Most importantly, it offers health, telemedicine services and educational resources. Rather than traveling hundreds of miles to get service, people can now stay in their community, in their homes, and receive quality health care. These programs strengthen the community. K-Net

...provide a means for the remote and rural communities to now have a voice that can be heard anywhere in the world. They are now able to share and market their knowledge, experience and products as they see fit instead of depending on others to be taking care of them.

In short: The five case studies are illustrative of the range of online presence found in the nonprofits identified in the study. Each employed Internet-based technology to achieve their organizational objectives; however, their use of this technology lies on a continuum in terms of the amount of face-to-face activity in which they engage and the type and degree of active online participation that they support

Active participation is a key feature of both the social economy and the "participatory web". An important question for future research is whether the criteria applied to online social economy organizations should be limited to groups that support a certain level of Internet-mediated interaction.

Although these findings are interesting it should be noted that the study represents baseline research and is only an initial step in identifying online social economy enterprises. More potential social economy organizations that incorporate emerging Internet technology need to be identified and more in-depth case studies are required to develop a better picture of these types of organizations. Future online social economy research can then begin to explore the contributions of these enterprises to an evolving internet mediated society.

To Find Out More

http://socialeconomy.utoronto.ca/english/project_pages/project_30.php