Synopsis

Key words: global network, Internet, expectations, practice, transformation

The case in this thesis is the 2001 e-conference initiated by the Dutch development organization Novib, and organized by the International Information Center and Archive for the Women’s Movement (iiav). The aim of this e-conference was to facilitate and generate exchange of knowledge and information on the topic of violence against women among the global partners of Novib by using Internet technology. The e-conference has to be regarded as a “failure” in the sense of its inability to promote participation, because only a limited number of potential organizations participated.

This thesis examines the experiences with the use of the Internet within a global network of development organizations. The aim is to understand how the great expectations towards the technology are transformed and revealed through the use of the Internet in practice. Utopian and deterministic expectations are present in the general public rhetoric as well as in the basis for the execution of the e-conference.

The experiences with usage of the Internet for exchange of knowledge and information were revealed through interviews with representatives from both Novib and iiav, in addition to a questionnaire-based survey among all the potential participating organizations.

In addition to the empirical material, STS informed theories regarding the relationship between technology and society, as well as literature on inclusion and exclusion in the “virtual society”, serve as framework and contribute to increased understanding of how the implicit theoretical position inherent in the e-conference is transformed in practice.
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Appendix A: Semi-structured interview guide

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Chapter 1- Introduction

1.1 – Setting the stage: The possible future tellings of Utopia and Dystopia

“We recognize that education, knowledge, information and communication are at the core of human progress, endeavor and well-being. Further, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have an immense impact on virtually all aspects of our lives. The rapid progress of these technologies opens completely new opportunities to attain higher levels of development. The capacity of these technologies to reduce many traditional obstacles, especially those of time and distance, for the first time in history makes it possible to use the potential of these technologies for the benefit of millions of people in all corners of the world”.


”It is still difficult to make use of Internet in an optimal way, because of all the problems connected to computer-mediated communication. People also have different expectations when it comes to how Internet may benefit them in their work. This is perhaps most evident in a global setting, when other factors besides direct Internet access play an important part. It has also proven to be difficult to get organizations engaged in forms of electronic conferences and discussion forums online”.

(Informant at Novib, interview 16.06.05)

The two statements presented above illustrate different expectations and experiences with the benefits and use of the Internet in order to promote social change and increase participation
and global exchange of knowledge and information. The first statement is a declaration principal from the United Nation 2005 World Summit on the Information Society, and indicates the great potential associated with the use of Internet and Information and communication technology (ICT) in general. The second is a statement from a representative from a Dutch development organization, and reveals a less positive attitude when it comes to experiences with the Internet as a medium for global exchange and communication. The use of ICTs are perceived differently by actors involved both in direct use and policy making, and reveal different views regarding the potential of the Internet to function as a public sphere in a global perspective in the sense that it is equally accessible for all.

As a starting point for the argumentation which I intend to present throughout this thesis, I will make visible the different expectations and diverging opinions concerning the Internet evident in the public rhetoric and the debates, as well as in the literature regarding the relationship between technology and society. The different expectations reveal paradoxes regarding use of the Internet and its implications, and give insights into problematic aspects regarding use of modern technology in a global perspective.

In many respects, the Internet is viewed as a modern and new technology but its origin goes back to 1969 when it was developed and used in Pentagon for military purposes. Although the Internet as we know it today has been accessible for a while, still more areas of social life make use of Internet, and it has attracted interest from both policy makers and academics. The extensive spread and exploitation of this technology have contributed to a vision of a “Virtual society” and a prospect for a technologically transformed mode of interaction (Woolgar, 2002, p.3). Great expectations are connected to the use of the Internet and computer mediated communication. Public debates often support the view that fostering the development of
Internet technology provides open access and a diversity of voices, and therefore promotes the emergency of a new public sphere. The rhetoric in common policy debates may often be recognized as a kind of "soft-technological determinism", which is a moderated version of the more absolute technological deterministic view (Jakobsen, 2003, p.20). According to a “soft-deterministic” view, technology has a strong influence on social development and it is difficult to control this progress. This view presents a somehow more nuanced account of the relationship between technology and society than technological determinism, which states that technology is an autonomous force with a direct impact on society (Jacobsen, 2003). The term “soft-determinism” implies expectations that introduction and use of new information and communication technology contribute to development, social change and increased participation as illustrated by the below statement from the 2005 UN World Summit on the Information Society.

“Our challenge is to harness the potential of information and communication technology to promote the development goals of the Millennium Declaration, namely the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; achievement of universal primary education; promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women; reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and development of global partnerships for development for the attainment of a more peaceful, just and prosperous world. We also reiterate our commitment to the achievement of sustainable development and agreed development goals, as contained in the Johannesburg Declaration and Plan of Implementation and the Monterrey Consensus, and other outcomes of relevant United Nations Summits”.

[Online]: http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html
Much of the literature concerning ICT as well as the rhetoric in public discourses, reveal great expectations connected to the use of the Internet and the positive consequences it will have with regard to social change. Within that dominant view, use of the Internet will contribute to increased participation and inclusion by giving excluded groups a possibility for participation. This optimistic position illustrates the belief in the revolutionary potential of new technologies of information and communication (Wyatt, 1998). The great hopes and expectations towards the use of the Internet in public policy making have served as a starting point, and contributed to my interest in the use of the Internet by development organizations.

The opposite view is that access to the Internet does not change anything, but rather continues the exclusion of marginalized groups and many people in the developing world. This view is evident in much of the literature concerned with the possible global “digital divide” in the information society (Haywood, 1998; Adam and Green, 1998). My hypothesis is that the use of the Internet creates new patterns for participation and negotiates the relationship between inclusion and exclusion. However, the great expectations connected to the use of the Internet are paradoxical when contrasted with the fact that access to the Internet is still distributed on a highly unequal basis which often overlaps other factors of marginalization.

Bridging of the “digital divide” is a major aim for the UN and other organizations which work in the area of ICT and development. The final goal is to ensure equal participation in the information society. To ensure equal opportunities for participation, according to my hypothesis other factors evident in the socioeconomic context besides the possibilities for technical access are important. The problems regarding the functioning of the Internet in areas of social life are grounded on different expectations and are linked to views about technology in general. These different expectations represent conflicting visions and assumptions on how
technology function in society, and may carry a political agenda as well as different ideologies concerning the role played by technology in society. The opposing views regarding use of the Internet as presented above, represent optimistic and pessimistic visions of the future. These opposing views are evident in a dichotomy between a utopian view that depicts a future in which the Internet facilitate universal participation, and a dystopian version emphasizing the potential of the Internet to continue exclusion (Wyatt, 1998). Both views are problematic in the sense that they are ideologies and future tellings rather than that they take into account how the Internet works in actual practices. Technological determinism may be detected among both technology optimists and technology pessimists and constitute a problematic aspect of the debate (Jacobsen, 2003).

According to my hypothesis, both views may be connected with problems due to the possibility that the Internet is neither the transparent means of access to everybody, nor is it necessarily just a continuation of existing inequalities. The original ideology of the Internet emphasizes it as "powerless" in an anarchical sense, with free floating information and no control or limitations. The virtual space should in this view be open for all and utterly transparent. The Internet has surely generated conflicting expectations, and reveals the complexity associated with use of technology in a social setting.

Development organizations make increasingly use of the Internet in order to connect organizations with common interests, and organize a joint force (Giddens, 2001). They have in many instances made use of the Internet in order to become organized and influential. Nevertheless, use of the Internet often holds a somehow deterministic expectation also recognized in the dominant utopian view. In 2001, the Dutch donor organization Novib organized an e-conference among its global partner organizations. The initiation of e-
conferences implies expectations that use of the Internet generates increased participation and
provides diversity of expressed opinions. The e-conference “failed” in the sense that only a
few organizations actively participated. All the organizations had a registered e-mail account,
and would therefore be expected to participate based on a deterministic view. The lack of
participation illustrates important divergences between the great utopian expectations and
solutions based on a technological fix and the real experiences in practice.

The starting point for this thesis is the somehow paradoxical situation that deterministic
expectations still exist in public rhetoric and everyday assumptions about technology, even
though the use in practice reveals a more nuanced and problematic situation.

1.2-Problem formulation

The extensive spread and use of the Internet in still more geographic areas of the world
present interesting and challenging questions and problem formulations. One of the main
problems connects to the highly diverging expectations related to the use of the Internet, and
especially the dominant assumption that Internet access automatically will promote social
change and increase participation when it comes to exchange of knowledge and information.
A somehow related and corollary problem relates to the existence of a possible discrepancy
between the ideological expectations and the experienced practices.

This thesis intends to contribute to an understanding of how use of the Internet in a global
network is experienced in practice, and how it relates to the great expectations made explicit
in much policy making and everyday rhetoric. The main issue is to reveal the underlying
mechanisms, such as technical or social access, which have an impact on how the Internet is
used and experienced in actual practice by development organizations. In sociological terms, identification of mechanisms is related to the identification of causes. Cause mechanisms are underlying aspects contributing to a specific outcome (Giddens, 2001). The identification of mechanisms is not in order to establish direct casual relationships but rather to reveal important contextual aspects. Throughout this thesis, I will use the concept of mechanisms in this sense. I find it especially interesting to examine the experiences development organizations have regarding use of the Internet as a tool for communication and exchange of knowledge and information. In that way, I might be able to understand how the Internet relates to the notion of a possible new public sphere. The dominant, utopian ideology connects improved access and use of the Internet to expectations of increased social change, and the use of the Internet is viewed as an empowering tool for resistance against suppression and marginalization, social mobilization and participation. This thesis intends to contribute to the discussion concerning the possibilities for social change and participation through the use of the Internet, and is understood through the way the Internet is used and experienced as a tool.

Through insights from STS and particular constructivist theories, I intend to question the “soft-deterministic” expectations regarding use of the Internet in contrast to the actual experiences with the use of the Internet among a global network of development organizations. Another relevant perspective is to use theories of public sphere in relation to the Internet, and contrast it with assumptions about inclusion and exclusion in the “virtual society” literature in order to discuss the Internet as a possible public sphere for development organizations. Within the theoretical framework, I intend to present different ideologies and theoretical approaches which serve to explain the relationship between technology and
society. By this presentation it may be possible to understand how theories of technology and society co-exist with and influence expectations regarding the Internet.

1.3- Main problem and sub-questions

How is the dominant ideology of transparency, social change, equal access, and new public spheres, as brought forward by the Internet, transformed and revealed in actual practice?

- To what extent do development organizations use the Internet for communication and exchange of knowledge and information?
- What are the experienced advantages and disadvantages connected to the use of the Internet by development organizations?
- How does the use of the Internet relate to social change, equal access and public sphere?

1.4- Thesis structure

The thesis is structured as following. After presenting the thesis structure, chapter 2 deals with the more general background for my thesis topic, including the concept of globalization in relation to ICTs, civil society and a brief presentation of the case and its main characteristics. In addition, chapter 2 contains presentation of methodological considerations in relation to my empirical approach. Chapter 3 and 4 present and provide clarifications about different, but still interconnected, theories which are relevant according to my problem formulations, and will be used in discussions in relation to my empirical material. Chapter 3 introduces and discusses different theoretical approaches regarding the relationship between technology and society. One of the aims is to reveal the theoretical ideology underpinning the dominant view
as well as the ideology regarding the relationship between technology and society inherent in the e-conference. Another aim is to introduce an alternative way of understanding technology and society. Through this presentation it is possible to understand how theories regarding the relationship between technology and society in an implicit manner are evident in expectations. Chapter 4 discusses contextual aspects regarding the actual use of the Internet, and relates it to theoretical concepts of a public sphere. This chapter is more concerned with the direct use of the Internet, and focuses on the contextual mechanisms influencing the use of the Internet in a categorical manner. The aim is to contrast it with the dominant view conceptualized as public sphere. Chapter 5 includes analysis and discussions of the empirical findings in relation to the theoretical framework in order to illuminate the problem formulations. Chapter 6 consists of concluding remarks. The conclusion aims at providing increased understanding of how the dominant ideology of technology is transformed and revealed in practice.
Chapter 2- General considerations

Before I present the theoretical framework and discuss it in relation to my empirical findings in the analysis, I will first give a brief account of the context for this thesis. The extended contextual themes are development and use of the Internet in relation to the notion of globalization and the importance of civil society. In the next paragraph, I present the opposing positions in related debates regarding the notion of globalization and the perceived impact of ICT. Then I give a brief presentation of the main characteristics constituting civil society. In this way it is possible to understand the use of the Internet by development organizations within a bigger picture. Thereafter, I present my empirical case in addition to the methodological approach.

2.1- Globalization and ICT

It has been argued that we have witnessed profound changes in communication patterns and also in the scope of global interaction over the past few decades (Giddens, 2001). Much of these changes may be attributed to the widespread introduction and use of modern information and communication technologies, and especially the Internet. The specific characteristics of these changes and the possible effect they have on global interaction are difficult to understand in a congruent manner. There is no general understanding whether these changes really represent actual stages of development. The rapid and extensive increase in the amount of economic and social activity taking place across national borders in a global manner is in many respects conceptualized as processes of globalization (Giddens, 2001).
The two main sides in the globalization debate, “globalists” and “skeptics”, represent different perspectives on how to understand the aspects associated with globalization (Schirato, T. and Webb, J., 2003). According to the “globalists”, globalization is a real and significant historical development resulting from real structural changes such as increased communication and economic and political interdependence. This perspective may be reflected in both the optimistic utopian view and the pessimistic dystopian view. “Sceptics”, on the other hand, view globalization as principally ideological, present more in the discourse than in reality (Schirato, T. and Webb, J., 2003). The different views on how to understand changes in contemporary society are evident in this difference between “globalists” for whom globalization is real and represent actual stages of development, and “skeptics” for whom it is discursive rather than real.

Related to this antagonism yet more evident within the “globalist” stand, is another contrast concerning the role of ICTs. On the one hand there are those who claim that ICTs have made it easier to communicate and provide access to information independent of time and material space. Here ICTs are understood as one of the main driving forces of globalization processes (Giddens, 2001). The Internet has become a powerful and widespread communication platform and an important source for acquiring information (Giddens, 2001). According to Narula (2003), technology is perceived as one of the causes of globalization. Although the author acknowledges that it is difficult to decide on the actual causes as well as the extent of the notion and effect of globalization, new ICTs contribute to a more interconnected world. According to this view, distances have “shrunk”, and this has not just taken place among the developed countries, but has also been a development trait in the developing world (Narula, 2003). In this view, technology that facilitate communication makes it easier for cross border exchange to occur, and the possibilities to establish alliances are improved. Such a view may
be somehow deterministic in the sense that it implies a notion that technological change results in social change in the meaning of increased participation and networking. In the past few decades, Internet facilities and connections have spread into more and more remote areas, and therefore contributed to the notion of increased inclusion in the information society as well as increased global interaction. Supporters of such a view often support the notion that such structural changes facilitate the existence of a “global village” (McLuhan quoted in Giddens, 2001, p. 461). This notion indicates a very much-interconnected world in which people in different geographic areas of the world depend on each other in economic, political and social terms. According to such a view, new media technology brings about changes in society in the sense that new ways of communication and exchange are possible (McLuhan, 1964). The notion also indicates an aspect of impact, in the respect of people having possibilities to mutually influence the behavior and opinions of others across geographical borders. Advocates of an existence of a “global village”, view the development as creating more cultural equality as everybody has access to the same information.

On the other hand, there are those who claim that this existence of a “global village” somehow might be a myth, and that the boundaries between local and global still exists. Not all people have the necessary resources to take part in the possible global exchange facilitated by the Internet. It is important to take into account that the Internet is still distributed on a highly uneven basis. In 1998, 88 per cent of the worlds Internet users were localized in the developed world (Giddens, 2001, p. 471). Even though access is improved many places in the world, problems are still connected to the uneven possibilities for access, often conceptualized as “digital divide” (Giddens, 2001; McLuhan, 1964; Castells, 2001).
In relation to the “digital divide”, it is important to be aware of the intension of the concept. The notion of a “digital divide” is a result of the understanding that uneven access to Internet creates information haves and information have-nots, and is in line with the dystopian position. The concept should also imply some sort of inequality, which not only has to do with difference in technical access, but also incorporates an element of disadvantage (Wyatt, Henwood, Miller and Senker, 2000). How differences constitute disadvantages are especially relevant in a global perspective where the Internet is used in different socio-economical contexts with different experiences of reality. Disadvantage is also a relative term, and does not include an absolute exclusion, but takes into account how different people relate to and experience the use of the Internet (Wyatt, Henwood, Miller and Senker 2000). Although the scope and existence of globalization can be contested, development and spread of the Internet is a real phenomenon, and expected to be of great importance. The political consequences of technology are in many ways also emphasized as an important aspect of technological development and use (Jasanoff, Markle, Petersen and Pinch, 1995). Different actors have an interest in the diffusion and use of the Internet, and the political agenda may differ according to a user or a producer point-of-view. Without giving this political aspect much consideration, it is important to notice that different political stances may be biased by the underlying theoretical position.

The notion that development of ICT is a driving force in globalization is often evident in the public policy making, as exemplified by the below statement from the United Nation Economic and Social Counsel. The problems related to the uneven distribution of access are emphasized, but the challenges are often dealt with in technical terms.
“ICTs is one of the driving forces of globalization and provides developing countries with opportunities for development. While ICT can provide opportunities for development, there are inequalities between countries and communities in the access and utilization of ICT. To bridge this “digital divide” and to participate fully in the knowledge economy, developing countries should create an enabling environment through introducing appropriate policies, capacity-building and infrastructure development”


Different contradictory views are evident in the globalization debate, and are asserted in the division between “globalists” and “skeptics”. The contradiction is connected to conflicting views regarding the role played by ICT in the general social development. The discussion presented above illustrates the problems associated with the creation of a uniform understanding of ICT and how it influences communication and exchange of knowledge and information. In spite of these conflicting views, it is necessary to take into consideration that ICTs in general and Internet especially, spread into still more geographic areas of the world, and are used by different actors. Both local definitions and constructions are important when discussing the use of the Internet. Below, I present the main characteristics of civil society and relate it to the use of the Internet.

2.2 – Presenting the concept and phenomenon of civil society

Development of civil society is understood as a major driving force for globalization and modernization (Giddens, 2001). International organizations like the UN, have acknowledged
contribution from civil society organizations as important and valuable. Their expertise and knowledge in diverse areas can create a better background for decision-making.

According to Waltzer (quoted in Young, 2002, p. 157), “civil society name the space of uncoerced human associations and also the set of relational networks, formed for the sake of family, faith, interest, and ideology”. Civil society includes many varied areas of social life resulting in a vague definition of the phenomenon. According to many political theorists, as for example Waltzer (in Young, 2002), civil society is distinguished from both state and economy as a third sector, and can be distinguished into three categories or levels of associational activity; private associations, civic associations and political associations. These three levels differ from each other in many respects but organizations can also move on all three levels (Young, 2002). Associations of the third sector are in most cases not for profit organizations, but to the extend as services and goods are provided, the objective is not to make a profit (Young, 2002). In most cases, civil society organizations work on the basis of interest, faith or ideology, and their work is often aimed towards marginalized groups. The civil society sector is characterized by voluntariness, and money income is in most cases a result of donations.

In many respects, civil society organizations may have replaced traditional state institutions as a result of the increasingly global character of problems, in addition to the growing need to deal with a diversity of issues related to modernization and industrialization. The development of civil society may also be a result of a general mistrust in the same state institutions, and thus represents a democratic problem. Groups may find that their objectives and ideals cannot be achieved within the regular democratic institutions, and experience new possibilities within the frames of civil society. The primary task is in most cases to defend the basic rights of all citizens. Civil society organizations vary according to size and area of work, and are often
cooperating and connected on the basis of thematic scope (Young, 2002). “Civil society includes a vast array of activities, institutions, and social networks outside state and economy” (Young, 2002, p.159). It is possible to operate with a dualistic theory of civil society (Young, 2002, p.163). Associations and social movements develop forms of communicative interaction and create networks as self-organization, in addition to the more outward aspect that is activities aimed to influence or reform state or corporate policies and practices. The aspect of self-organization is a way for people and organizations with shared interests and perhaps a marginal position to mobilize their resources, and give excluded groups a voice (Young, 2002). Some civil society organizations work primarily on a local level with concrete, practical work tasks as providing shelter or consultative practices. Other organizations have a more global character, and their work aims at providing solutions to global problems. Great expectations are related to the use of the Internet as means to connect isolated organizations and promote exchange of knowledge and experiences. A huge part of civil society organizations operating in different geographic areas of the world do make use of the Internet as a tool for communication, information exchange and organizing activities. The development and use of modern ICTs have been emphasized as a way to connect organizations with common interests (Giddens, 2001).

2.3 – The case of development organizations

In this thesis I focus on a specific part of civil society, namely development organizations working to combat violence against women. I intend to explore the diverse mechanisms influencing the use of the Internet by studying usage of the Internet within a network of development organizations. The specific network of organizations operates in diverse parts of
the world, which formally would make it a global network. Although their working methods and strategies are different, they are all working for the same goals: rights and security for women.

The specific case is an electronic conference in 2001 initiated by Novib and organized by the International Information Center and Archive for the Women’s Movement (iiav). Novib is part of Oxfam International, and serves as a donor organization in the sense that the organization provides financial support to projects initiated by relevant organizations all over the world. Oxfam International is a global umbrella organization and consists of regional offices in different geographic areas of the world. Novib is the Dutch office and cooperates with both sister organizations in the Oxfam network and a number of other organizations. The iiav created a gateway of information and communication between Novib’s partners actively engaged in projects involving violence against women around the world. The e-conference was carried out during six months with various topics every fourth week, and the potential participants were all partner organizations of Novib and Oxfam GB.

The e-conference was carried out as a way to exchange knowledge and experiences on a global basis on the topic of violence against women. The initial idea was to develop benchmarks in the area of donor support, and the e-conference was also thought to be a preliminary session before an actual face-to-face meeting. Out of the almost 150 organizations in the network invited to participate in the discussions, only about 30 organizations actually contributed in an active way. This is a paradox when contrasted with the great expectations presented in the introduction part of this thesis. Later in the thesis, I will present mechanisms related to the use of the Internet which possibly account for the limited number of
organizations participating in this e-conference, and link it to general theoretical assumptions of how technology function in society.

After the 2001 e-conference, Novib developed a web page in the area of gender-based violence. The idea was to make this web page a virtual space where all the partner organizations could share their experiences. The web page consists of relevant papers received from the counter partners of Novib in the area of gender-based violence. A forum was also created with the intention of carrying out interactive discussions on relevant issues.

In addition to the 2001 e-conference, the specific web page will be included in further discussions regarding the use of the Internet by development organizations in this global network. Through a study of actual experiences with use of the Internet within this present network of development organizations, it is possible to contrast the experiences with the expectations and in this way reveal how the dominant ideology of technology is transformed in practice.

2.4 – Methodological considerations

Methodological considerations are of great importance in order to secure validity and reliability in the empirical material. In this section I will present the strategy and the methods I have used in order to acquire the necessary information, and discuss possible problems and sources of error connected to my empirical material.

The methods used are questionnaire and interview. I will discuss reliability and validity in relation to both the qualitative interviews and the semi-structured questionnaire, which
constitute my empirical approach. A substantial part of this thesis consists of literature review in order to establish the theoretical framework, and get insight into the different topics of interest. Both the theoretical framework and the empirical material intend to explain technology in a specific context, and in this way not “black box” the technology itself. In order to make considerations about my research project, I also intend to focus on methods used for data collection and also sampling strategies.

2.4.1- Strategies and methods in my empirical approach

In order to gather the necessary information, I conducted four interviews and administered a questionnaire among the global partners of Novib. The interviewees were selected mainly on the basis of relevance, by the use of a purposive sampling strategy (Robson, 2002). The selected interviewees were key informants in the respective organizations, and were selected because of their position and interest. I decided on two key informants respectively in Novib and iiav. They were both contacted by e-mail and requested to meet me for an interview. The informant at the iiav in Amsterdam was directly involved in the development and execution of the e-conference, and therefore an important source of information, both in practical and ideological matters. The informant at Novib in Den Haag worked in the area of Internet campaigning, and would therefore be able to answer questions regarding computer-mediated communication. The information received at iiav turned out to be of great importance. However, the informant at Novib was not able to answer all my questions regarding the e-conference, and he provided me with two additional contacts at Novib. This particular selection strategy, snowball sampling, was of great importance in order to get supplementary information about the predetermined topic (Robson, 2002). The initial key informant at Novib
identified other important resources within the organization that provided additional information and opinions. The four interviews with important representatives from both organizations resulted in necessary and complementary data about the use of the Internet in a network of global organizations. The use of non-probability samples is optimal in this case study because it is no intention or need to make a statistical generalization, but the focus is rather to acquire in-depth insight on specific topics.

The questionnaire was distributed to all of the Novib partners in the area of violence against women. Their e-mail addresses were found on the Novib web pages. I did not make selection on any other criteria than partnership, because I wanted to include all organizations relevant for my case. In that way, I hoped to get as many responses as possible.

My empirical material mainly consists of information generated from the use of qualitative methods. The methods used are semi-structured qualitative interviews and questionnaire with fixed and open responses. The questionnaire resulted therefore in both quantitative and qualitative material. I intend to discuss sources of error in relation to both methods chosen for this purpose.

With use of interview as a method, different approaches are possible both in structure and style. It is common to distinguish between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Robson, 2002, p.269). Within the frames of this thesis, a semi-structured approach was most suitable in order to gather the necessary and relevant information. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility of responses according to a predetermined list of topics and in that way generated in-depth information. According to my problem formulations, semi-structured interviews allowed for a flexible and adaptive way of seeking
answers to my research questions. The interviews were all carried out in a face-to-face situation, and I used a tape recorder with permission from the interviewees in order to make the recollection of information possible. The advantages of using a tape recorder in these specific situations were important compared to the possible disadvantages. I did not experience any major disadvantages for the informants, because the topics in question were not sensitive for them personally, and they were also interested in communicating their experiences and opinions.

In an interview situation it is important to be aware of possible sources of error that might influence the data, and try to compensate in order to overcome these errors. Sources of error are the possibility that informants hold necessary information back, or the interview situation itself in which you as a researcher may affect the interviewees’ behaviour or responses. A third error might be that informants only provide you with the information they think you want. This specific phenomenon might be due to both leading and ambiguous formulation of the questions, and the tendency for informants to give social acceptable answers (Robson, 2002). All these errors might present threats to validity, which has to do with the research being accurate or correct (Robson, 2002). I tried to compensate for these possible errors by developing a topic oriented semi-structured interview guide, and using a minimum of one hour on each interview. I also reflected on my own behaviour in the actual interview situation, and tried to let the interviewees express their opinions within the frames of the topics as freely as possible. In this way, a sense of trust was established. I also had all the information on tape, and was in that way able to contact the interviewees for follow-up questions in cases where I needed some additional information or wanted to confirm unclear information.
In order to include experiences and opinions from the global partners, I developed and distributed a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed with both open and fixed alternatives for answers, and in this way incorporated both qualitative and quantitative elements. I used this design, because the elements would complement each other, and provide both in-depth and statistical material. It would also be more time saving compared to the strategy with just open alternatives for answers, and thereby contribute to an increased response rate. The questionnaire in addition to the interview guide, will be included in the appendix at the end of this thesis.

The organizations received the questionnaire by e-mail after previously receiving an invitation containing the purpose of the research and a request to contribute. Mail questionnaire is increasingly common but a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages is of great importance. Some obvious advantages are that it is time-saving and it is possible to reach out to a large number of people. The disadvantages are that mail questionnaire typically has a low response rate, and that misunderstandings in the questions may not be detected (Robson, 2002). Nevertheless, because the topic in this thesis is the use of the Internet by development organizations, I found it relevant and exciting to use the Internet as a tool in my research. In this way, I would experience the use of the Internet for communication and exchange of knowledge on a global basis.

In order to secure reliability and validity, I made considerations regarding the design of the questionnaire in order to secure as high response rate as possible. In developing the questionnaire, I used a Questback program and made use of methodological rules in order to formulate the questions in a clear and unambiguous way. The use of the Questback program
made it easy for the respondents to answer and reply it back. The specific layout in the program ensured anonymity.

Unfortunately, the questionnaire did not produce as many responses as I hoped for, and this represents the basis for important considerations and discussions especially regarding validity. The concept validity is concerned with whether the findings are really about what they appear to be about, while reliability refers to the stability of measurement. Both concepts concern the establishing of trustworthiness in the material (Robson, 2002, p.93). The low response rate may represent a validity problem, as it is difficult to comprehend the reasons for the non-responses. It is hardly possible to make any concluding, statistical remarks based on the responses received, as it is not possible to assume that the non-responses would have been similar to the responses received. It is also possible that the questionnaire really measured third variables. In many cases, it was impossible to send the questionnaire to organizations due to technical problems with their Internet access. I see this is an interesting observation, because it may indicate important aspects about the use of the Internet contrary to the dominant ideology. Because of the low response rate, I find it rather interesting to discuss possible reasons for the non-response. I will return to this in chapter five, and relate it to theories presented below in addition to other empirical material.

The open ended responses in the questionnaire may in a cautiously way be used later in the discussions, as they provide more in–depth information compared to the fixed-alternative response questions. In that way, they may give some indications on how the use of the Internet is experienced in a global perspective. Some of the respondents received additional in-depth questions in order to supplement the open-ended questions, and in that way I got necessary qualitative material.
The methodological considerations presented are important in order to analyse and discuss the empirical material later in this thesis. By giving an account of possible sources of error, it is possible to establish trustworthiness in the material, and contrast it with theoretical approaches and concepts in order to understand how the dominant view of technology is transformed in practice. The different theoretical approaches and concepts are presented in the next two chapters.
Chapter 3 – Theories and conceptual framework

The development and use of the Internet have attracted much interest from different disciplines, such as for example sociology, history, psychology and philosophy. The next two chapters introduce the theoretical material studied as a background for this thesis. The theoretical concepts presented in chapter 3 and 4 will be used for forthcoming discussions, and discussed in relation to my empirical material. By presenting various theoretical approaches to technology, it may be possible to reflect how theories on technology are evident in opinions and practices regarding the use of the Internet. In the present chapter, I will use insight from STS literature, and argue that constructivism may contribute to an understanding of the relationship between the Internet and society. In chapter 4, I will also use theories about public sphere and literature discussing inclusion and exclusion in the prospect for a “virtual society”, and the impact use of Internet is experienced to have on social change and participation in networks (Woolgar, 2002). Internet is expected to be of great value concerning participation and social change. I want to discuss public sphere theory in relation to theories regarding the use of the Internet in order to be able to discuss the Internet and its possibilities to generate participation on a global basis.

Part of the ideology of the Internet and of the ideology of globalization is that through ICTs new public spheres are made which are not only freely open to all, but which also are performative in that they stimulate people to participate. The utopian vision and ideology is telling about what theory of technology is required, and is in line with the term “soft-determinism” as I presented in the introduction. The ideology is also saying something about what these public spheres look like and are capable of. By using these strands of theories, it is
possible to establish a theoretical framework necessary to examine civil society organizations and online activity.

3.1 – Different approaches on the relationship between technology and society

The ideology inherent in the great expectations towards the Internet is evident in the deterministic terminology and implies a somewhat technological fix in which technology is viewed as the solution to problems of different kinds. I choose to question the deterministic mode of explanation because of the fact that only a few organizations participated in the 2001 electronic conference as presented in my case. The introduction of a global medium of communication and information exchange may not facilitate direct social change and increase participation as expressed through a deterministic view. Internet technology has social significance as it affects human communication. But to account for this phenomenon according to a technological deterministic explanation, the contextual significance is neglected and it may be difficult to understand the possible discrepancy between expectations and actual experiences. Through a presentation of technological determinism I intend to inquire whether a deterministic view of technology implicitly is evident in the belief Novib has in e-conference as a tool for exchange of knowledge, and if the implicitly held theory of technology influenced the outcome of the e-conference. I will also through discussing STS informed theories regarding the relationship between technology and society introduce STS as an alternative frame of understanding regarding the use of the Internet. In the following sections, I will present the different theoretical approaches to the study of the relationship between technology and society and continue the more analytical discussion in chapter 5.
The different approaches presented are Technological determinism and Constructivism (Wyatt, 1998). I present two different approaches to constructivism. Social constructivism is exemplified with the use of Social Construction of Technology approach (SCOT), and radical constructivism is inherent in Actor-network theory (ANT). Within ANT I will mainly focus on the notion of co-production, in which technologies and societies are mutually constitutive. I recognize this approach as providing the most important contribution in order to understand the use of the Internet in practice.

3.1.1- Technological determinism

Technological determinism is in line with much public policy statements regarding the use and introduction of the Internet. Although most academics today reject a deterministic perspective, it is still evident in the public discourse as illustrated by the official expectations towards the Internet presented in the introduction (Wyatt, 1998).

According to a deterministic view, technologies are perceived in a linear manner and have a direct impact on society and also promote changes. According to a deterministic ideology, immanent in the Internet-technology is that it will promote social change and increase participation through the generation of an open and freely accessible public sphere in which differences and inequalities become invisible and redundant. Technological determinism view technological development as taking place outside society, independent of social, political and economic forces (Wyatt, 1998, p.10). This would suggest a fully predictable impact of the Internet on society. The deterministic approach states that technological progress represents social progress, and the aspect of change is unidirectional. Within this approach, human choices are not emphasized, and social change is the direct result of technological change
(Wyatt, 1998). It is evident in the utopian position that technological development and use promote participation and global exchange. The unidirectional view in the deterministic approach emphasizes the direct impact of technology upon society (Wyatt, Henwood, Miller and Senker, 2000). Many theorists as for example Castells and Winner have been accused and criticized for being deterministic in their approach towards technology, because they have emphasized the effect and impact of technology upon society (Bijker, 1995).

Even though the critique is widespread, it has in many ways proven difficult to move beyond the deterministic approach, partly because it is in line with “common sense” apprehension of technology. Most people experience technology as it is introduced and have to deal with the changes it represents in their everyday life (Wyatt, 1998). The use of the Internet is expected to influence social life and this view is evident in much policy making. In order to question such a view, it is necessary to question the validity of the underlying theoretical perspective. As stated above, the deterministic approach neither takes into account the choices made by users, nor does it take into account how society influences technology. To assume a direct causal relationship between technological change and social change imply a somehow simplistic explanation of a more complex situation. Evident in technological determinism is the assumption that technologies are inherently political (Winner, 1980). This is evident in the expectations regarding use of the Internet. The implicit political view is that the Internet constitutes a democratic technology available to all.

The approaches presented next are understood as critiques of technological determinism, and may be used to explain the relative “failure” of the e-conference and possibly provide an alternative theoretical basis for the expectations. I will return to this critique in the analytical
chapter later in this thesis, and in this chapter concentrate the discussion on a more theoretical level.

3.1.2 – Social constructivism/ SCOT

The STS field provides an alternative framework for the study of technology and society. Social constructivism and radical constructivism refers to different related constructivist approaches within science and technology studies. Instead of examining the impact of technology upon society, the focus is rather to examine how technology is socially shaped or constructed as opposed to the view of technology as an autonomous developing force in society (Jasanoff, Markle, Petersen and Pinch, 1995, p.225).

The best-known approach within social constructivism, Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) is more concerned with technological development than actual use, and focuses on the notions of ”interpretive flexibility” and “relevant social groups”(Bijker and Law, 1992, p. 75-76). The perspective is in many respects associated with the work done by Bijker and Pinch. The development of a technology is seen as the result of negotiations between the supporters of different alternatives, which in the end result in a mode of stabilization and closure when one alternative is acknowledged as the final result. During this process, relevant social groups are identified. The social groups are identified according to their active interest in the development and negotiation process. The notion of interpretive flexibility indicates that different social groups attributes different meaning to technology. The same artifact may be understood and interpreted in a variety of ways, and in this way the artifact itself is a social product. The concept of interpretive flexibility indicates that the “success” or “failure” associated with an artifact is not intrinsic properties but rather subject to social variables.
SCOT points to the notion that technological artifacts could have been different due to the social aspects of technology development (Bijker and Law, 1992). The development of technologies is in this view understood as a process involving political, economical and social aspects, as contrary to the deterministic approach, emphasizing autonomous development. The meaning associated with technologies is shaped through a number of negotiations, and the development of technology follows a social rather than an immanently internal logic (Bijker and Law, 1992). According to SCOT, the identification of relevant social groups is important in order to understand technological development, because the negotiations and compromises between these groups are deciding when it comes to the process of stabilization.

However, the identification of relevant social groups may provide a basis for inclusion and exclusion in technological development. Feminist research has criticized the notion of relevant social groups because of possible biases in the identification process. Possible relevant groups may be neglected, and therefore they are not able to influence the development of technological artifacts. According to feminist approach, the problem with identification of relevant social groups is how to take into account structural exclusion in technological development (Wajcman, 2000, p.452). In a feminist perspective, this marginalization and exclusion is often expressed in the absence of women in the spheres of influence. Because technological artifacts are socially constructed, elements of power and exclusion may be detected in the process of development. These elements of power are not just evident in the negotiations and compromises between identified social groups but are also expressed in the exclusion of potential relevant social groups (Wajcman, 2000).

According to social constructivist perspectives, technology functions in society and not as a separate field. Technology is constructed within society and the development of technological
artifacts is not autonomous from social, political and economic factors (Wyatt, Henwood, Miller and Senker, 2000). This notion of technology as interwoven with society, politics and economics, is within social constructivism described as a “seamless web” (Bijker and Law, 1992, p.201). This notion indicates that the distinction between technology and society itself is a social construct, and should not be taken for granted. (Wyatt, 1998). People construct the technology in different ways and it is difficult to talk about isolated technologies as active transformers.

Social constructivism offers a different understanding of technology than the deterministic explanation and argues away from a technological fix implying a notion of technology as an autonomous force in society. Proponents of SCOT rather argue that technological development is part of a complex socio-technical system influenced by different mechanisms. Social constructivism and especially SCOT, has enhanced the understanding that technology development is not an autonomous force independent of other areas of social life, through its emphasize on relevant social groups and the process of closure. SCOT emphasizes that technological development is the result of contextual processes. According to SCOT, social processes influence and have an impact on technology in contrast to technological determinism which emphasizes the direct impact of technology upon society.

SCOT has contributed to an STS informed understanding of the relationship between technology and society through introducing the concepts of “interpretive flexibility” and “relevant social groups”. However, the explicit focus on the development of technological artifacts and the importance of social aspects in this development, has contributed to the critique of SCOT as social deterministic. The approach may be understood as reductionistic in the sense that the social is emphasized on behalf of the technical, and proponents of the SCOT
approach assumes only people to have the status as actors (Akrich, 1992, p.206). Thus, SCOT in a way appears as asymmetrical as technological determinism. While technological determinism argues that technology influence society, SCOT assumes that social factors influence technological development. In this way, the technical and the social are more or less arbitrary divided into different spheres. ANT has challenged this asymmetry immanent in SCOT between technology and society, as presented in the next section.

3.1.3. Radical constructivism/ ANT

A central theme in the STS literature is the mutual construction of technology and society (Jasanoff, Markle, Petersen and Pinch, 1995). In order to further the understanding of how technology function in society, I will use the concept of co-production evident in radical constructivism. This term implies technologies and societies as mutually constitutive. Neither technologies nor societies have immanent power but their functioning as well as their political power is produced when they are developed and used. I will present the notion of co-production in order to incorporate the mutual shaping aspect. The notion of co-production is evident in the radical constructivist ANT approach and may provide valuable understanding as to how technology and society have a mutual impact.

Actor-network theory is widely associated with the work done by Latour, Callon and Law (Wajcman, 2000). This constructivist approach may represent an alternative to both social and technical reductionism, in the sense that social change is neither seen as the result of technological development, nor is technology a by-product of social progress (Bijker and Law, 1992, p.290). In this way, ANT is based on the principle of generalized symmetry in
which no distinctions are made between nature and society. Proponents of ANT view the perspective as a way to overcome the dichotomy between technology and society inherent in both technological determinism and SCOT. While SCOT considers a division between the human world and society and the world of technological artifacts, ANT considers this to be an arbitrary distinction. Actor-network theory is strongly reluctant to see the construction of technology and society as separate spheres that influence each other. Such an asymmetry is present in both SCOT and technological determinism. ANT rather holds that technology and society are mutually constitutive and use the notion of a “heterogeneous network” (Wajcman, 2000, p.451, Akrich, 1992, p.206). According to Akrich (1992, p.206) "technical objects participate in building heterogeneous networks that bring together actants of all types and sizes, whether human or non-human". The principle of symmetry evident in ANT, states that error and truth should be treated in the same terms. The same social factors could be applied equally to both (Latour, 1993, p.92). Also Law (1994, p.9) emphasizes this principle of symmetry when he insists that “everything deserves explanation and, more particularly, that everything that you seek to explain or describe should be approached in the same way”.

According to ANT, there is no a priori stability or predeterminations in regard to technology and society but the categories become established in use as effects rather than predefined distinctions. “Actors take on their form and acquire their attributes as a result of their relations with other actors” (Law 1999, p.3). Within the network, both humans and non-humans may serve as actants and produce interaction. ANT challenges the asymmetry in SCOT by introducing the notion of co-production in which all actors in the network influence each other. Humans should not be privileged within the study of these networks, and the social, the technical and even the natural should be analyzed in the same terms. “The social should not have any analytical advantages on behalf of the technical” (Law and Bijker, 1992, p.290). The actors of an actor-network are bound together and are constituted and shaped by these
relational networks (Bijker and Law, 1992). In an ANT perspective, it is not possible to assume that neither technology nor people are the source of change in a unidirectional way. Rather, the responsibility for action must be shared among all the various actors (Latour, 1999, p.180).

Within ANT the process of mutual shaping or co-production is emphasized as a way to understand that actors are not simply shaped by the networks in which they are located, but they also influence the elements with which they interact (Law and Callon, 1997, p.25). ANT provides a useful tool for the study of the relationship between technology and society, because it acknowledges the mutual shaping aspect without giving neither the technical nor the social any explanatory superiority. Evident in the ANT approach is the transition from social construction to co-production. Instead of focusing on how technological artifacts are socially constructed as in the SCOT approach, ANT view technology and society as co-produced with mutual impact. All participating unities are viewed in a relational perspective. Neither the actors nor the network exist in their own right but they co-exist and co-produce and are shaped in use. Within ANT, actors do not have any inherent power, and the quality is not a cause but rather a consequence of the collective actions taking place. A central aspect of ANT is according to Latour (1987) to avoid focusing on the inherent characteristics of things, people and artifacts, but rather mapping the changes they are going through as a result of use in order to become consolidated. This idea indicates that ranges of use and development paths are not predetermined or fixed proportions independent of time and geographical areas.

The co-existence and co-production is a result of the collective activities and framings taking place, and the actors produce and reproduce themselves through the network. The notion of co-production may be understood by indicating the concept of script as a process (Akrich,
1992). The procedural view indicates conversions of the object through use. The first phase in this process is “inscribing” in which characteristics and visions of the world are inscribed into the object by the innovators. These characteristics may be about interests and conceptions, and the object makes possible certain ways for use. (Akrich, 1992, p.208). The innovators assume a particular relationship between the object and its surroundings, which is negotiated on an ongoing basis through use. These prescriptions indicate certain possibilities and restrictions in relation to use already inscribed in the object. Users may define different roles or visions. The next phases are illustrated by the terms “ascription” and “circumscription” (Akrich and Latour, 1992, p.259). The activities that take place relate to changes in the object as a result of interaction with the surroundings. All the actors in the network influence each other through mutual shaping in interaction. The objects are defined and re-defined through use, and the aspect of influence is mutual. The user interacts with the pre-inscribed artifact, and can challenge and renegotiate the meanings and uses of the artifact (Wajcman, 2000, p.451). Through these processes of interaction, the actors in the network are mutually constitutive. A possible problematic aspect is that the inscribed relations and visions may not be able to take into account all potential users, and this is especially evident when technology is used in a country culturally distant from its origin (Akrich, 1992). In this way, “decription” takes place in the negotiation between the inventors’ projected users and the real users (Akrich, 1992, p.209). The network consists of many elements which re-define and influence each other.

3.2 – From linear to relational: A comparison of the approaches on conceptual issues

The three theories presented in this chapter have different approaches to the study of the relationship between technology and society. Technological determinism views technology as
an autonomous force outside society, as opposed to the constructivist approaches which view technology as interwoven with society. Technological determinism is concerned with the impact of technology on society, and accounts for technology in a linear manner implying that technological change has a direct impact on social change. The social context is not considered important in deterministic analysis and theories. The social constructivist approach SCOT is mostly concerned with the development of technological artifacts, and the social aspects influencing this development. SCOT intends to illustrate and make visible the controversies and compromises associated with technological development. One of the main insights from SCOT is the acknowledgement that technology does not exist in a vacuum, independent of the social context.

However, both technological determinism and SCOT are accused of being reductionistic. The radical constructivist approach ANT accounts for the relationship between technology and society in relational and symmetrical terms. Neither technology nor society constitute predetermined categories, and in this way the context is constituted within the network. Through the notion of co-production, the actors in the actor-network experience mutual shaping. According to Edwards (1995), technology interacts with politics, society and culture. Technology rarely causes social change in the direct sense implied by the technological deterministic approach. However, “technology may create pressures and possibilities to which social systems respond” (Edwards, 1995, p.284). “Neither a “social impacts” nor a “social products” approach will produce an adequate picture of the interaction between technology and society” (Edwards, 1995, p.284).

The different theoretical approaches presented will be used in forthcoming discussions in relation to the empirical case. I intend to use the theories in order to make visible and
substantiate the ideologies underpinning the expectations regarding the use of the Internet in
general and the e-conference in specific. I will use these approaches in order to try to explain
why this particular e-conference “failure” and if it is connected to a implicitly held view of
technology. In this way, I will be able to explain how the theoretical perspective inherent in
the e-conference promote or inhibit emancipatory use of the Internet.

In order to get a more specific understanding of the use of the Internet, I will in the next
chapter present contextual factors important for the use of the Internet. To reveal and
understand the context is in line with constructivist approaches to technology, and will in this
way contribute to a more profound understanding of the role the Internet plays in a global
network of development organizations. By revealing the contextual factors, and contrast it
with the concept of public sphere, it may be possible to question the dominant assumption
regarding technology.
Chapter 4 – Public sphere and the use of the Internet

In this chapter I will discuss the Internet as a networking technology and how it may facilitate or hinder the ability to create a sphere of interaction and communication which is equally accessible to all members of the global network. In this chapter I will use theories regarding notions of inclusion and exclusion in the prospect for a virtual society, including theories about the implications of the use of the Internet.

4.1- Internet as a public sphere?

In order to understand how the Internet is experienced as a new public sphere, I find it relevant to start by presenting Habermas’ concept of a public sphere. I choose to use his definition as an entry point as his research is widely acknowledged. Implicit in the dominant deterministic ideology is the notion of the Internet as a new public sphere. According to such a view, social change is a direct result of technological change. The constructivist approaches emphasize the importance of mutual shaping of technical and social elements. The theories regarding the use of the Internet may reflect some of these contextual aspects. In this chapter I intend to illustrate some of the mechanisms underpinning the use of the Internet by especially focusing on non-use, in contrast to views about public sphere and the Internet.

Habermas’ (1989) idea about the public sphere is a sphere in which political activism and engagement is expressed. He applies the concept on a bourgeois society, and it is associated with the civil society, and constituted in discussion. Habermas traces the long roots of public sphere into the closed doors of saloons and coffeehouses in which people come together independent of social hierarchy (Habermas, 1998). The public sphere is political in the sense
that communication is concerned with the evaluation of public policy. Although the topical orientation might be different in these spheres, the conversations and coming together of peers in these saloons and coffeehouses facilitated discussions and problematizations of areas that until then had not been questioned (Habermas, 1998, p.36).

“The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people comes together as a public” (Habermas, 1989, p.27).

“The issues discussed became “general” not merely in their significance, but also in their accountability: Everyone had to be able to participate” (Habermas, 1998, p.37).

Various groups use the Internet to exchange knowledge, discuss and co-ordinate their activities. Within civil society organizations as a whole, the Internet has become widely used, and attempts have been made to theorize the Internet as a public sphere and as means of enhancing public discourse (O’Brien, 1999). I choose to use Habermas` ideas about what constitute a public sphere, as a conceptualization of the ideas about equality, transparency and social change inherent in the dominant, utopian ideology. Young (2002) uses Habermas` concept of a public sphere in his account of public sphere and publicity in civil society. In accordance with Habermas, he emphasizes open access to spaces or fora in order to characterize the sphere as public. In Habermas` definition, the public sphere is materialized in a physical place like a saloon or a market place.

After the emerging of the Internet, the challenging task has become how a virtual space may constitute a public sphere. Because the Internet is used in many areas of social life, many
people have high hopes to the Internet and the potential emancipatory character it is expected to reveal (O’Brien, 1995). Electronic media is considered public in so far they are easy to access, and in this way contribute to expand public interaction. Habermas’ concept of publicity refers to the social space generated in communicative action. Nancy Fraser (1993) is critical to the democratic character inherent in the notion of a public sphere. She states that even though people have equal formal access, the more privileged groups tend to dominate the public sphere in societies with social and economic inequalities. Internal exclusion from the public sphere may exist as a result of rhetoric and discursive style. In this view, the social space may be restricted in the possibilities for democratic communication and equal possibilities for participation.

Shirato and Webb (2003) suggest that the Internet may serve as a new public sphere as it allows for interactivity, and the virtual public sphere replaces the old public sphere meeting places where people could gather for information exchange, discussions and joint action. According to Woolgar (2002), it is necessary to specify the actual group of focus when trying to understand the possible social impacts of the Internet. In this case, the focus is on a network of development organizations, and the impact is understood as participation and communication in regard to social change. Castells (2001) also assumes that the Internet serves as a virtual public sphere for civil society organizations as a communication medium, and compares the Internet with the physical meeting places of pubs and saloons. In his view, “the Internet becomes the indispensable component of the kind of social movements emerging in the network society” (Castells, 2001, p.139). Castells is somehow “soft-deterministic” in his account of the Internet as a public sphere, and his arguments are based on the assumption that the Internet is becoming an essential medium for communication and organization. His understanding of the impact of the use of the Internet is presented in a linear manner.
According to Castells, it is obvious that civil society organizations will increasingly use the Internet for communication and exchange of knowledge and information (Castells, 2001). The Internet is understood as a technology with a revolutionary potential, in which technical access and global diffusion will reveal its potential in the sense that it creates a public arena for civil society organizations. In the next section, I will present different contextual aspects related to the use of the Internet, in order to question the linear, deterministic assumptions.

4.2- Contextual aspects related to the use of the Internet

According to Woolgar (2002), the uptake and diffusion of the Internet is not uniform, rather contingent on restrictions and incentives present in the social context. This argument is in line with social constructivist notions as presented above. The social aspect is emphasized in many accounts of the relationship between technology and society, as also evident in the statement that: “A network technology has to incorporate existing patterns of human interaction in order to be used, and then playing a significant role in reproducing long standing sets of social relationships” (Wyatt, 1998, p.7).

Almost all aspects of social, cultural, economic and political life may be affected by the new electronic technologies (Woolgar, 2002, p.2). Woolgar (2002) intends to account for the impact of the Internet on social relations and institutions, and still upholds a critical view and supports alternative ways of understanding the relationship between technology and society which challenge the traditional optimistic and pessimistic views and ideologies. By using some of his arguments regarding the Internet, it is possible to see the possibilities for the Internet to function as a virtual public sphere. Woolgar (2002) discusses how new technology
in general, and especially the Internet, functions in society, and if changes in participation, inclusion, exclusion and communication are taking place as a result of electronic technologies. Next, I will present the five rules of virtuality developed by Woolgar to illustrate and comment to the prospect for a virtual public sphere. The rules represent a way to evaluate the deterministic claims made in relation to the use of the Internet. Within the frames of this thesis, I will emphasize rule number one and three as I find them more relevant according to my line of argumentation.

Woolgar’s five rules of virtuality (Woolgar, 2002, p.13-20)

Rule 1: The uptake and use of new technologies depend crucially on local social context.

Rule 2: The fears and risks associated with new technologies are unevenly socially distributed.

Rule 3: Virtual technologies supplement rather than substitute for real activities

Rule 4: The more virtual the more real

Rule 5: The more global the more local

Rule number one -the uptake and use of new technologies depend crucially on local social context- deals with aspects of the context, besides the pure technical access, involved in the use of the Internet. In order to understand if the Internet may or may not facilitate increased participation and the creation of a public sphere equally accessible to all, this rule emphasizes the importance of examining contextual factors which may have implications for the use of the Internet. The social aspects of access are to a large degree acknowledged in the “virtual society” literature as important in addition to just direct technical access (Liff, Steward and Watts, 2002). Besides the focus on the social and economic complexity of the Internet, Wyatt, Thomas and Terranova (2002) challenge the claim for universalism related to the use of the
Internet, by stating that access to the Internet remains unequal. They analyze different aspects of the access problematic and concentrate on the use of the Internet in addition to non-use. In order to include the aspect of non-use, the authors hope to overcome the deterministic expectations that once technical barriers are overcome, people will embrace the Internet technology. According to people in the public policy making, access to the Internet is seen as necessarily good, and the main policy challenge is to remove access barriers (Wyatt, Henwood, Miller and Senker, 2000). The authors take into account that people may stop using the Internet or they do not intend to use the Internet. In this way, users are not only recognized as passive recipients of technology, but have an active function in shaping its meaning (Wyatt, Thomas and Terranova, 2002, p.25). The authors argue that to some extent, use is determined by the way users perceive the Internet. Non-use could in their opinion be an expression of a potential gap between expectations and the reality of actual experiences. The expectations imply that the Internet is an unproblematic and inexpensive way to access information and communicate with people all over the world. The reality is often perceived in a somehow different manner with expressions of problems related to finding information, junk e-mail and navigating through the Internet (Wyatt, Thomas and Terranova, 2002). The possible discrepancy between expectations and actual experiences may hinder the use of the Internet in an optimal way illustrating the expectations.

When analyzing the circumstances regarding non-use of the Internet, it is important to take into consideration the different categories of non-use. A distinction can be made between avoidance behaviour and active resistance, as well as a distinction between non-use of Internet as a whole and just non-use of specific aspects (Miller and Thomas, 1995, p.256-7). These distinctions indicate that the world of non-use is compelled by different reasons for why people do not use the Internet, and have different political implications. The political
implications involve decisions on what strategies to carry out in order to stimulate increased use of the Internet, in addition to the possible disadvantages experienced by the non-users. Voluntary exclusion differs from involuntary exclusion in the sense that the latter may indicate a more expressed sense of marginalization.

Wyatt, Thomas and Terranova (2002, p.36-7) have identified four types of non-users. The first group involves the resisters and those who have never used the Internet, and which are non-users by choice. The second group has also voluntarily stopped using the Internet, perhaps because they find it expensive or because they have alternative sources of information and communication. The third group is considered to be socially and technically excluded. They have never used the Internet due to problems regarding access. The final group is involuntary inhibited from using the Internet because of cost or because of the loss of institutional access.

In a global perspective it may be recognized that the explanations given in the groups three and four to a larger extent may be present in the developing countries than in the developed part of the world. People use or do not use the Internet of different reasons, which is understood as an expression of different socioeconomic environments. If the Internet is to serve as a public sphere according to the definitions and characteristics presented above, it requires access for all those who want to be involved. The different reasons for non-use have raised questions about access to information and information networks, and especially in relation to the potential vulnerable and marginalized groups the negative implications of exclusion have been emphasized. A solution is that inclusion must be a process, “which is the result of the ”human agency” of the many diverse individuals, and cultural and national
groups who should help shape and determine, and not merely access, technological outcomes” (Wyatt, Henwood, Miller, Senker, 2000, p.15).

The literature concerning exclusion and inclusion in the virtual society (Bergham, 1995; Burchardt et al, 1999 in Woolgar, 2002, p.95) “emphasizes social exclusion as a multidimensional phenomenon and state that it is not only about a lack of material goods but also about an inability to participate in a range of social, cultural and political processes”. This statement emphasizes not only the problematic aspects of inequality in technical access, but is also concerned with the possible social disadvantages resulting from these differences.

It is difficult to talk about both access and disadvantages in absolute terms, as they are acknowledged as relative terms dependent on local definitions and expectations (Wyatt, Henwood, Miller and Senker, 2000). Many people in the western world have a different definition and perspective on what constitute Internet access, than people from the developing world. In many instances, access to the Internet is not a personal access but rather a rare good shared by a community. Mentioning of this is not to reduce the importance of providing and securing technical access to the Internet on a global basis, but rather to be aware of the multitude of socioeconomic situations having impacts on the definition of access (Wyatt, Henwood, Miller and Senker, 2000). In these terms it may be stated that technical access as well as the expectations are social constructs and related to the actual experiences with the use of the Internet, and it is therefore difficult to talk about a “digital divide” in absolute terms. Research regarding non-use of the Internet has revealed that besides technical access, time and money limitations are important factors. Also experienced necessity is among other factors which have implications for the use of the Internet (Woolgar, 2002). A firm, general definition of the necessity of the Internet, may contrast local definitions and be of importance
in relation to the debate regarding the expectations. According to this first rule of virtuality, social context as conceptualized as non-use, has to be taken into consideration when dealing with use of the Internet and its implications.

Rule number two is closely associated with the first rule. This second rule recognizes that “views about new technology, the concerns and enthusiasm, are unevenly socially distributed” (Woolgar, 2002, p.15). This understanding is a corollary of emphasizing the importance of social context as presented above. How people perceive and attribute technology is understood in accordance to socioeconomic circumstances. Experiences from the use of technologies in complex social situations have the ability to transform predisposed assumptions, and reveal a variety of counter-intuitive usages of technology (Woolgar, 2002). New technology is not always used according to expectations, and the same technology can be experienced and attributed in different ways in diverse socioeconomic contexts. This rule emphasizes the importance of examining the practical use of technology, and not just focus on predefined assumptions. This view is in line with my own intention when questioning the dominant expectations regarding the use of the Internet.

Rule number three provides useful acknowledgement that real activities taking place in the real world will not be lost as the result of introduction and use of virtual technology (Woolgar, 2002, p.16). Even though the Internet has the capacity to make communication across borders and the creation of optional identities possible, most people still use virtual technology as a supplement to their everyday activities. Much research has been focused on the expectations that virtual technology creates a clear distinction between an on-line and an off-line life. The early research on use of the Internet warned that people who used a lot of time in a virtual reality became social restricted in the sense that they participated less in social activities in the
real world (Woolgar, 2002; Castells, 2001). In this view, the Internet created a new reality with a much distinct character. This has proven to be much exaggerated and the activities in real life have not been absorbed. Research shows that new technologies tend to supplement rather than substitute existing practices (Woolgar, 2002, p.16). The use of the Internet for communication work alongside the need to still uphold face-to-face communication. In this view, the Internet adds a new dimension to both work and social life and underpins existing practices of exchange (Woolgar, 2002). This new dimension is experienced and constructed differently by people in different situations. The ideas present in this rule to some extend overlap with the fourth rule. This rule emphasizes that not only do virtual activities co-exist with activities in the real world, but virtual activities may also stimulate more real world correspondence (Woolgar, 2002). The extend of this phenomenon is not well known but research in different situations has revealed that virtual contact may facilitate more face-to-face contact. The easy nature of electronic communication may connect people otherwise not able to meet, and this may lead to increased traveling (Woolgar, 2002).

Castells (2001) has also been strongly reluctant towards the assumptions that introduction and use of the Internet will create clear distinctions between reality and virtuality. He emphasizes that “simplistic, ideological dichotomies make an understanding of the new patterns of social interaction difficult” (Castells, 2001, p.117). In accordance with Woolgar’s fourth rule of virtuality, Castells states that “use of the Internet strengthen social relationships both at a distance and at a local level” (Castells, 2001, p.123). In his view, use of the Internet and other ICTs facilitate extended contact between people and organizations otherwise not able to meet. These relations may in turn contribute to increased travelling and face-to-face interaction.
The issues presented in the fifth rule are closely related to the discussion of globalization presented in the second chapter of this thesis. According to the “globalist” understanding of the phenomenon, globalization refers to the extensive exchange across borders. ICT plays, according to this view, a vital role in the development, and contribute to the notion of a “global village”. In order to escape local context and promote a global identity, people depend on specific local ways of managing the technology. This view add a new dimension in addition to the recognition in rule number one that local context affects uptake and use (Woolgar, 2002, p.19). Research has recognized the local relevancies as more important than global use.

The theories presented in this chapter show that use of the Internet is both dependent on and facilitated by different contextual factors. The new technologies are not used according to expectations (Woolgar, 2002). The rules of virtuality presented above provide a more nuanced account for the use of the Internet and the possible impacts, contrary to the pessimistic and optimistic views on how technology function in society. The rules treat and illustrate different aspects that influence and underpin the use of the Internet. In order to understand use of the Internet, it is important to take into account the non-use and reveal the underlying mechanisms and social constructs underpinning the non-use. Only by focusing on these aspects, it is possible to get a more accurate understanding of the use of the Internet besides the more somehow superficial and deterministic expectations and utopian visions. It is then also possible to discuss the Internet as a working public sphere among development organizations. Based on the theoretical approaches presented above it may be difficult to acknowledge and recognize the Internet as a public sphere according to Habermas` perspective and definition, because of the hinders associated with the non-use. Mechanisms in the socioeconomic context may influence use of the Internet, and may contribute to increased
non-use of the Internet and thereby decrease the possibilities for participation in the exchange of knowledge and information in a global network. I will return to this discussion in the next chapter of this thesis.

4.3- Concluding remarks on the theoretical framework

The theories presented and discussed in chapter three and four create a coherent theoretical framework for the analysis and discussions of the present empirical case. The presentation and discussion of the different theoretical perspectives in chapter three, illustrate the complexity associated with the understanding of the relationship between technology and society. The ideologies inherent in these theoretical perspectives underpin the respective stances taken towards the use of the Internet. Both technological determinism and SCOT have been accused of being reductionistic, in a technological and social sense. ANT introduces the notion of co-production and challenges the asymmetry inherent in both SCOT and technological determinism. Through the discussion of the different approaches, it will be possible to discover the implicit theoretical positions concerning technology and the Internet held by the actors in regard to the e-conference. It may also be possible to reveal how a held theoretical approach has consequences for use of the Internet in practice.

Chapter four discusses the notion of the Internet as a new public sphere inherent in the deterministic view, and contrasts it with theories on how contextual factors may facilitate use or non-use. Woolgar’s rules of virtuality provide contextual understanding of the mechanisms having an influence on use of the Internet in accordance with the constructivist approaches, and in this way add an additional dimension to the understanding of technology in use. The publicity associated with the Internet is challenged on different grounds based on contextual
factors. According to some theories presented above, the Internet may serve as a public sphere as the technology allows for interactivity and equal opportunities. This view is criticized by referring to aspects in the socioeconomic context that might have an impact on the use of the Internet. According to this view, the use of the Internet cannot be understood in a linear manner because contextual factors influence the use of the Internet in practice.

The theories presented will be used in order to evaluate how the dominant ideology of technology is transformed in practice. The theories will serve as framework in the discussions of my empirical material in order to understand the implicit theoretical positions underpinning the e-conference, as well as the position concerning public life. A major aim is to try to explain how these held theoretical positions have implications for the practical use of the Internet through focusing on the reasons for non-use, and if future e-conferences should be based on different theoretical positions.
Chapter 5- Empirical findings: Analysis and discussion

So far in this thesis, I have argued that the great expectations towards uptake and usage of the Internet in many respects are in line with the deterministic view presented in chapter three. However, insights from STS literature as well as the “virtual society” literature, show the complexity associated with the use of the Internet, and the need to take into account contextual aspects, and the impact technology has on society has to be explained in relational terms. Both the utopian and dystopian views are criticized against the background of the claim that they often represent future tellings, and deterministic claims may be detected on both sides of the debate. A more appropriate approach to the study of technology in practice is perhaps to use the notion of co-production in radical constructivism, and to make explicit the contextual mechanisms having an impact on the use of the Internet. For the sake of my argument, I use the term “impact” in my discussions of the possible effects of contextual mechanisms on the use of the Internet in practice. Even though this term needs critical attention, and may imply a separation between technology and society, I intend to use the term in congruence with the principles in the ANT approach.

In this chapter I will present and discuss my empirical material in relation to the theoretical concepts, in order to find out what the e-conference uncovered about the Internet and technology based on experiences and opinions. Through this discussion, I will be able to provide answers to my problem formulations and account for how the dominant ideology of technology inherent in the public discourse is transformed in practice.
5.1- From ambitions to failure

The ideology behind the e-conference was based on a belief in the theory and potential of the Internet to serve as a public sphere with equal opportunities for participation. The ambitions evident in the e-conference were to generate discussion among the global partners. The potential participating organizations were all members of the same global network. The initial ambition was to facilitate exchange of knowledge and experiences on a global basis. The e-conference was expected to contribute to the sharing of information throughout the global network. The initial ambitions related to the e-conference, illustrate the great expectations connected to the use of the Internet for exchange. However, the e-conference has to be regarded as a failure since only a limited number of organizations actually participated. The e-conference failed to reach its expected potential, and this discrepancy between expectation and actual experience, illustrates that the e-conference was based on a theoretical vision of technology and the Internet which did not function in practice. The failure of the e-conference to generate the discussions as expected reveals Novib’s expectations regarding the Internet and has to do with implicit theories of technology.

Novib had faith in the technology to facilitate global communication in order to make possible exchange of knowledge and information in the area of violence against women. The initial aims behind the e-conference were to develop benchmarks in the area of development organizations and facilitate increased exchange. Through contributions from all the global partners, Novib would be able to develop specific areas of interest in which to focus their donations and efforts. The use of the Internet for communication in order to generate exchange reflects a specific held theory of technology. Implicit in the use of the e-conference is the belief that Internet-technology generates exchange of views and function as a public
sphere with equal possibilities for participation. This indicates that Novib regards technology in a somehow reductionistic sense, and their ambitions and expectations are influenced by the specific theory of technology. Based on the characteristics of technological determinism, it may be possible that Novib in an implicit manner used the deterministic view of technology in their account of the e-conference. Different contextual mechanisms were not taken into consideration, and the e-conference was carried out according to an ideology that technology has direct social impacts and in itself generates participation.

In order to find out why the e-conference failed, it is necessary to questioning the implicit held theoretical position, and thereby taking into consideration different contextual mechanisms as possible reasons for the non-use.

5.2- Determinants for the failure of the e-conference

Different advantages and problems in relation to usage of the Internet in a global network of development organizations were revealed and expressed during the interviews and statements from the questionnaire. The identified problems may account for the failure of the e-conference to generate and influence participation.

All my informants view the use of the Internet as an important tool based on expectations that the Internet makes communication and access to different kinds of information easier. At the same time, they acknowledge the problems associated with the use of the Internet and emphasize that the Internet is not used in an optimal way due to these problems. These problems may be expressed as mechanisms in the sense that they reveal contextual aspects which influence the ability to use the Internet. Because of the relatively low response rate to the questionnaire, it is difficult to estimate accurately to what extend the development
organizations use the Internet for communication and exchange of knowledge and information. However, the answers received provided indications that development organizations in a subjective way view the use of the Internet as important, but the information aspect may be of greater significance than the communication aspect. The advantage mostly emphasized in the responses to the questionnaire was the ability to access information regarding woman’s issues. The possibility to establish global networks and exchange knowledge and information were to a lesser extent emphasized. One of the informants at Novib told me that the organization does not have regular contact with their counter-partners but they try to approach global organizations by e-mail. The experiences have shown that this contact has been rather marginal due to perceived problems with the use of e-mail for communication. It was also emphasized during one of my interviews at Novib that “There might be too many requests by e-mail at the same time, and we could see from the responses that people were a bit tired of it” (informant at Novib, 22.05.05).

The contact Novib had with the organizations they supported was to a large degree face-to-face contact. In the early phase of the established contact, representatives from Novib travelled to the country in question and met with the representatives of the organizations after clearing up expectations by the use of the Internet for communication. The reasons for the physical travelling were to avoid misunderstandings due to language or technical problems, and to speed up the bureaucratic processes. Communication by the means of the Internet was also avoided to a minimum because of delays in the communication and technical problems. Another problem is that not all organizations have access to the Internet. According to Woolgar’s third rule of virtuality, the Internet has not replaced traditional forms of communication. The informants revealed attitudes that use of the Internet in a global perspective was difficult and not an optimal way to establish contact in the first phases.
The difficulties associated with the use of the Internet in communication on a global basis were revealed and expressed in interviews with all informants. These difficulties can serve as explanations for the failure of the e-conference to generate participation. The problems associated with the use of the Internet were expressed in terms of mechanisms that influenced this use. A variety of casual mechanisms were introduced as possible reasons for the failure of the e-conference. The mechanisms illustrated different aspects of the socioeconomic situations. Even though the complete lack of technical access to the Internet was introduced as a reason for the failure of the e-conference and for the difficulties of using the Internet in communication and exchange in general, other aspects were more pronounced. These aspects have to do with technical problems but also social access plays an important part in the non-use of the Internet. According to the categorization of non-use presented in Woolgar’s first rule of virtuality, the last two categories are of most importance and emphasize the involuntary nature of the non-use. Most of the organizations responding to the questionnaire reported that they would like to use the Internet more, and participate in e-conferences etc. Because of problems beside technical access, they are involuntarily prohibited from using the Internet in an optimal way according to their own subjective definitions. The first rule of virtuality also emphasizes the importance of taking into consideration contextual mechanisms.

The interviews with my informants in both Novib and iiav in addition to the responses to the questionnaire, revealed different problems conceptualized as mechanisms prohibiting the use of the Internet in the global network of development organizations. Presented in a short way, the problems concerned technical problems, insecurity of their own contribution, perceived advantage, cost, time, language problems, writing skills, resources, practical/local tasks that
are perceived as more important, and work overload. These are all mechanisms which may inhibit the utilization of the expected potential of the Internet. I will account for these problems in depth throughout this chapter. Even though these mechanisms are perceived as most problematic, and in accordance with Woolgar’s rules of virtuality, the lack of direct technical access still serves as a problem in regard to participation in different geographic areas of the world. During one of the interviews at Novib, lack of technical access was recognized as a reason for non-use and accounted for the limitations regarding the use of the Internet within the network. “Some organizations hardly have access to e-mail. I mean, if you are in Africa then in some countries it is difficult to have access. So, it has its limitations” (informant at Novib, 22.05.05). Also the global partners responded marginal technical access to be a reason for their non-participation in the 2001 e-conference. “Did not have unlimited Internet access at that time”, “Problems in the networking, power cuts, needed to make extra effort to use the Internet”. Statements like these illustrate that lack of technical access still is evident in regard to the use of the Internet.

During the interview with the informant at the iiav, an interesting aspect was revealed which may account for the failure of the e-conference to produce active participation and engagement within the network. The informant suggested that maybe people in the global network have different notions and expectations as to what constitute a partnership, and how they want and need to relate to their partners. Related to my case, the reluctance to participate in the e-conference may be due to the existing relationship between the organizations. Access to the Internet does not automatically lead to increased participation. According to Woolgar’s first rule of virtuality, people may choose not to use the technology in any one occasion, and the causes for this rejection may be found in the socio-psychological context. Existing relationship determines the use. Participation depends on the perceived advantage of the
outcome. This situation is illustrated by the statement that: “An organization operating in Asia and who is used to communicate with the Asian Novib office, may find it strange and unnecessary to participate in a e-conference initiated by the Dutch Novib office. They don’t have an existing relationship with that organization, and they don’t see what is in it for them” (iiav, 16.06.05). In order for the Internet to serve as a medium for communication, the ties between the organizations have to be established in advance. The use of e-conferences does not facilitate participation in itself, and the failure of the 2001 e-conference might be a result of the different notions of partnership. The organizations supported by Novib in the area of violence against women do constitute a network in a formal sense but this does not necessarily secure a sense of belonging and partnership. It is possible that Novib considers the organizations to constitute a stronger network than actually experienced by the diversity of global partner organizations. One of the informants at Novib illustrated this possibility by emphasizing that “we like to be partners and appreciate the notion of partnership but it is not always the priorities of partners to use the Internet” (informant at Novib, 22.05.05). The answers received on my questionnaire indicate that organizations define themselves as locally oriented, and not necessarily as part of a global network. Although they also emphasized the importance of the Internet in regard to communication and access to information. The below quotation indicates that the Internet is mostly used for communication with relevant organizations within the same geographical region.

“So, an organization in the Philippines would communicate with the Philippines regional office, and not with somebody over in Holland who says “we would like to have a discussion”. The partnership concept might be different. I think that might have an effect” (iiav, 16.06.05).
Another possible reason for the failure of the e-conference might, according to the informant at iiav, be that Novib as a donor organization can inhibit open communication. This is also understood a priori to the Internet. My empirical findings may show that the existing patterns of human interaction in the global network are too weak in order for the e-conference to stimulate active exchange of knowledge. The global organizations depend on the support they receive from Novib and they might be reluctant to share information because of the division in status. Money will also unquestionably influence the relationship between organizations with unequal status and position in the network, as illustrated by the presented statement.

“The money issue exists between the organizations in the network (…) Because Novib is a donor organization this may inhibit the will other organizations supported by Novib have to share their experiences” (iiav, 16.06.05). Also Novib itself emphasized this aspect in their account of the failure of the e-conference. “Even though we like to be partners, money is of course always a issue. First of all, we are a founding agency and organizations might be reluctant to share experiences with us. Money complicates things, and makes it harder for counter partners to react. It might complicate the relations between partners and us” (informant at Novib, 22.05.05). This aspect regarding unequal position in the network contributes to voluntary non-participation, and was most likely not considered to be a problematic aspect in the organizing of the e-conference.

The interview with the representative from iiav revealed that writing skills might inhibit organizations from participating in e-conferences. Experiences from the 2001 e-conference in addition to other e-conferences organized by iiav, indicate that “only a small amount of the organizations feel confident with writing. What we discovered is that there is a small group of people who has got the time, feel comfortable with the language and who actually likes to write. And that got to be different with a face-to-face meeting” (iiav, 16.06.05).
Another aspect important for the successful use of e-conference is confidence about own contribution. “Another thing is how many people actually do feel they have anything to say on anyone particular question or topic. Many people resist to contribute themselves, and rather prefer to lurk” (iiav, 16.06.05). The term lurk implies that organizations just read a discussion group without making contributions themselves. This phenomenon creates increased non-participation and is a contradiction to the notion of the Internet as a public sphere with equal and mutual contributions. The lack of social skills serves as a barrier when it comes to possibilities for active participation. It is a possibility that the low participation in the e-conference might be due to uncertainty with own contribution. “Many organizations feel that they don’t have relevant information to share” (informant at Novib, 22.05.05). How the Internet is perceived might be reflected in the use as well as the quality. Experiences from e-conferences show that the quality on the posted messages differs according to geographical location. “Differences in how people from different parts of the world write messages. People from the west write things that are “nothing, easy”. Other participants from the south were more accurate, specific. The quality of their writing was higher in the sense that they feel that they need to have something really important to communicate, if they are to use the Internet and send e-mails” (iiav, 16.06.05). This statement is based on experiences with the use of e-conferences in a global perspective and indicates that the Internet is attributed in different ways, often according to the overall socioeconomic context. Organizations with a more marginal technical access are probably more likely to attribute the Internet as an important and expensive technology compared to organizations with optimal technical access.

Even though Novib in the initiation of the e-conference reflects a somehow deterministic attitude towards the technology, iiav was aware of possible limitations due to language
dimensions. The iiav organized the e-conference and tried to create a design that was sensitive to the language dimension. They expected that this sensitivity should secure extensive and active participation. They believed that securing the language dimension would be sufficient for the Internet to serve as a public sphere. The theories presented in addition to my empirical material indicate that the situation is much more complex, and language is not the only mechanism having an impact on the usage of the Internet.

“What was remarkable in the novib conference was that we had these four languages, and we had this … process that everything was available in all languages. The first time we did that, each and every item was translated into all languages. And every correspondence posted to the chair was translated. So the language dimension was there, and we knew what people needed French, Spanish etc” (iiav, 16.06.05).

In addition to the contextual mechanisms discussed above, other mechanisms might be found within the organizations themselves, illustrated by financial problems, or expressed as technical problems. “Small organizations, they don’t have a clear management. They have just enough money to do the things they need to do. Not enough money to even do that. They don’t have time to hang around the Internet, pay incredible high costs of communication. And have a chat with people they don’t know about their thoughts (…) And not all people are writers and feel comfortable with writing (…) Plenty of people are doers, in the sense that they for example provide prostitute protection in Colombia” (iiav, 16.06.05). The experiences and reality evident in this statement indicate that the utopian expectations inherent in the e-conference differ from the actual experiences. Technical access does not guarantee active participation and equal possibilities for all members of the network. An interesting aspect when discussed in relation to the deterministic expectations is that direct technical access is of
less significance compared to other socioeconomic mechanisms. In this respect, limitations are related to financial problems, technical problems, and focus on everyday tasks. One of the informants at Novib acknowledged that the great non-participation might be due to the fact that most organizations in the network are practical organizations. Their main focus is everyday tasks and a general lack of resources might have influenced the participation in the e-conference. A response to the questionnaire from one of the global partners illustrates the aspect of time limitations and use of resources on practical tasks. “I am really sorry that we are too busy recently that we cannot help you to do the questionnaire” (statement from one of the global partners in response to the questionnaire). This aspect makes visible the different priorities of organizations as part of the social context.

Another problem is related to technical difficulties but illustrates problems regarding distribution of resources. “It is a huge amount of spam, and it costs a fortune to deal with the problem. That is a big issue for people in their communication” (iiav, 16.06.05). Also the global partners emphasized technical problems, and especially related to spam, as important aspects of their involuntary non-use of the Internet. “We dedicate an enormous amount of time to monitoring e-mail and redistributing information. Spam and indiscriminate cross-posting makes this task harder”. (Statement from one of the global partners in response to the questionnaire). The problems with spam in addition to other technical problems are most pronounced in connection with a general experience of marginalization. The responses to my questionnaire provide good indications for the assumption that global organizations experience different kind of marginalization. They emphasize the use of the Internet as important but are involuntarily prohibited from optimal exploitation due to contextual mechanisms.
5.3- The discrepancy between expectations and experiences

The mechanisms identified as problematic in relation to the use of the Internet on a global basis are presented above. They deal with and illustrate the socioeconomic contextual factors emphasized by Woolgar in rule number one and are considered to have an impact on the uptake and usage of the Internet. It is important to account for these factors in order to discuss how the dominant ideology of technology is transformed in practice. As presented previously in this thesis, the dominant ideology views technology as having direct social effect. The identification of problems regarding the use of the Internet presents a more complex situation. The failure of the e-conference to generate participation may be reflected in the implicitly held theory of technology.

The dominant ideology of technology is in many respects evident in the e-conference and proved to be problematic in actual practice. The dominant ideology is very much still a future telling in the sense that inequality still exists in regard to differences in technical and social access. Due to socioeconomic circumstances in a global perspective, the ideology of the Internet as a transparent mean is not a reality. The expectations that technology causes social change in a linear manner have proven to be incorrect due to the exposure and identification of various socioeconomic mechanisms. The practical use of technology has revealed that other factors beside technical access play an important part in order to understand the uptake and usage of the Internet. The mechanisms involved in the use of Internet have to do with factors as diverse as time limitations and costs. Usage of the Internet influences social behavior in the sense that divisions between use and non-use are questionable. At the same time, the Internet is redefined through use and new meanings are attributed to the technology. The relative "failure" of the e-conference to generate participation has in a sense contributed
to a reattribution of the Internet as a medium for communication and exchange of knowledge and information. Novib was forced to move away from the somehow deterministic expectations and account of the Internet, and attribute the Internet as a more complex technology.

The identified problems presented and analyzed illustrate the complexity associated with the use of the Internet. Non-use is in many cases a combination of involuntary and voluntary reasons, and in this way the boundaries regarding inclusion and exclusion are negotiated. Some of the reasons for the non-participation may be seen as voluntary decisions. However, it is important to emphasize that the use of the Internet and e-conference in particular, require that organizations hold a diversity of skills other than technical skills. The necessity of diversity of skills might be inscribed in the technology. As presented above, perceived writing skills and language skills are necessary skills that might facilitate or prohibit participation in e-conference.

As the presented explanations indicate and express, the use of the Internet depends on other factors beside the technical access and ownership. Of course access is important, as many organizations still lack complete access or experience technical problems. Many of my informants emphasized that they experience technical problems with their own or others access which serves as a barrier for optimal use of the Internet. The Internet is interpreted in different ways and illustrates the constructivist aspect of the Internet. For some it represents means for easy communication and information access. For others it represents both possibilities and restrictions. My research may indicate that this divide in attribution is in accordance with a more general divide on a global basis. People in different geographic areas in the world acknowledge the use of the Internet as a way to participate in global exchange of
knowledge and information, but the participation may not take place in an optimal way due to contextual factors. A general statement from my global informants is that they would like to be able to participate more actively in e-conferences and other types of exchange.

The Internet is acknowledged as a useful tool, and in that respect it has influenced the relationship between inclusion and exclusion. The responses to the questionnaire revealed that development organizations in the network view the Internet as a useful tool mainly for access information about issues related to violence against women and use of e-mail for communication among related organizations. Still they experience problems of different kinds. Implicit in many statements from my informants is the ideology of Internet as an active transformer, and also the acknowledgement that the use of the Internet has not reached its possible potential. Even though the Internet is not a new technology, in many respects it is still difficult to use. The discussion of the problems related to the use of the Internet is conceptualized as contextual mechanisms, and challenge the initial view of the Internet as an autonomous force in society. The explanations presented and analyzed throughout this chapter illustrate the problems with understanding the use of the Internet in a technological reductionistic manner. Technology does not determine society, and the Internet does not directly cause a free and open sphere. The use of the Internet in practice has revealed a much more complex situation than what is inherent in the technological deterministic theory. By uncovering the mechanisms influencing the use of the Internet in practice, the discrepancies between the expectations and the experiences are revealed. Next, I present two examples which illustrate the problems associated with the expectations that the Internet constitutes a public sphere.
5.4- The Internet as a public sphere with equal access?

The relatively few responses I received on my questionnaire may be used as a critique of the notion of the Internet as a public sphere, and equal and transparent means of access for all. The relatively low response rate on my questionnaire may be a reflection of the problems associated with the use of the Internet in a global context. It has proven to be difficult to use the Internet as a tool for communication in a global perspective. Many messages could not be delivered to the recipients due to technical and communicational problems. As the mail delivery failed, many messages were returned to sender. From the delivery system administrator I got various explanations for the failed delivery. Organizations either lacked the necessary capacity, their e-mail account was full or they had temporarily technical problems. One of the explanations pointed to a communication problem with the recipients’ e-mail server. Another common reason was that the message was undeliverable because the address was unknown. These findings are in line with the experiences people at Novib have with the use of the Internet for communication with their global partners. My own experiences in the research may suggest that technical access is not equally distributed. Many organizations experience problems with the use of the Internet. One of the informants at Novib emphasized technical problems related to e-mail as a major barrier towards the use of the Internet for communication. Although they had databases with the e-mail addresses to all counter-partners, internet-based communication was still problematic. “The e-mail addresses have to work. It is difficult to make them work. Many are just “bouncing” back” (informant at Novib, 22.05.05). This statement is in accordance with my own experiences, and challenges the notion of the Internet as a new public sphere as evident in the deterministic ideology.
Related problems are evident in regard to the web page developed by Novib after the 2001 e-conference. The initial idea was to create a public sphere in which organizations in the network could exchange experiences and participate in interactive discussions. “The idea was that it should be an exchange place for our partners, and the purpose was that people could exchange experiences and share reports and therefore learn from each other” (informant at Novib, 22.05.05). Years after the web page was created, the initial aim has not yet been fulfilled. One of the informants at Novib pointed at lack of resources as an explanation. “It is difficult to maintain such a web page without the necessary capacity (..) We were quite ambitious” (informant at Novib, 22.05.05). One of the representatives at Novib working in the area of gender based violence, emphasized that they had tried to inform their counter-partners of the existence of the web page on several occasions. Still the web page is not used according to their expectations. One explanation might be that ”we have not been able to show our counter-partners what could be of importance for them related to the web page” (informant at Novib, 22.05.05). In order for the web page to facilitate discussions, it is acknowledged that one important aspect is to find topics of interest and relevance. Novib also intend to focus the attention at those organizations that explicit work in the area of gender based violence. In that way they might be able to specify the area of relevancy.

5.5- Final reflections on the empirical findings

The possibilities to make use of the Internet in an optimal way are not equally distributed among the organizations in the network. Different reasons for non-use are revealed and may be recognized as underlying mechanisms prohibiting the use of the Internet. All four categories in Woolgar’s distinction in rule number one are recognized among the reasons for the non-use. Some of the informants did not participate because they prioritized other
important tasks, and therefore constitute non-use by choice. This may of course seem a bit simplified due to other possible underlying mechanisms which have an impact on that decision. The prioritizing of other local practical tasks has often been seen in relation to money and time limitation.

Other reasons for the non-participation in the e-conference have been reported as involuntary. Insufficient technical access to the Internet is still a widespread problem and makes computer-mediated communication and exchange of knowledge and information problematic. My informants in both Novib and iiav reported that many of their partner organizations on a global basis lacked technical access to the Internet. However, a more common problem reported from my interviewees and in response to the questionnaire, is that organizations are not able to use the Internet for communication and exchange of knowledge and information to the degree they would prefer, due to technical problems with their own and/or others’ Internet access. In this way they are excluded from optimal participation and exploitation of the possibilities presented in the great expectations regarding the use of the Internet, even though they to some extent are included in a virtual sphere. This situation, reflecting Woolgar’s last distinction of non-use, represents problematic aspects in both the utopian and dystopian visions regarding the use of the Internet. Their experiences with the use of the Internet are reported as lying somewhere in between both visions. The empirical material from the questionnaire reveals that the use of the Internet is valued as important for the local practical work by the organizations, even though they also acknowledge that they do not use the Internet in the optimal way they would prefer. These observations, in addition to the interviews, illustrate that neither the utopian nor the dystopian expectations are in accordance with the experienced use of the Internet in practice.
Based on my empirical material, the real experiences with the use of the Internet are not in accordance with the deterministic expectations inherent in the e-conference. The initial expectations are transformed and moderated in line with the real experiences, and the social context is recognized as important concerning the use of the Internet. The failure of the e-conference to generate exchange of experiences illustrates the difficulties with deterministic expectations, and reveals the complexity associated with the use of technology in practice. The Internet is not a technological fix, which in itself will promote social change and a functional public sphere. Socioeconomic contextual mechanisms have proven to be important barriers regarding the use of technology. The Internet attracts a diversity of users with their own contextual reality. Therefore it is not possible to regard the Internet as an autonomous force independent of contextual impact. The potential users and the relations between the different actors are defined by the ability to use the Internet. The actors in the global network are shaped through the use of the Internet, and therefore they also change the expectations. A statement from one of the global partners illustrates the ambivalence between problems and expectations associated with the use of the Internet. “We lacked capacity and technical capacity at times internally to engage in online discussions and would like to be able to connect more in these fora when it is directly relevant for our work”.

The failure of the e-conference to generate participation and function as a public sphere illustrates that the conference was based on a wrong theoretical perspective. In order to try to secure a more “successful” outcome in future e-conferences, a different theory of technology should be the basis and underpin the expectations. The identification and discussion of the problems related to practical usage of the Internet indicate that it is insufficient to understand the relationship between technology and society in a technical reductionistic way. ANT may be used in order to explain why the e-conference did not function according to expectations.
According to ANT, all elements in the network influence each other, and this theory of technology does not regard the use of the Internet to promote participation in a linear way. My empirical material illustrates the importance of taking contextual mechanisms into consideration in the planning of an e-conference. Then the expectations are based on a more realistic ground. ANT may be used as a tool in order to understand the use of technology in society. The field of STS, and especially radical constructivism, may contribute to more realistic expectations towards the use of the Internet. By using an ANT informed understanding of the relationship between technology and society, it is evident that the Internet is part of a complex network of actors that redefine and influence each other.

One of the points stressed by ANT is the concept of co-production as presented in chapter 3. Instead of the Internet having unidirectional social impact, the empirical material presented illustrates that both the Internet and the organizations influence each other. The Internet has negotiated the relationship between inclusion and exclusion but at the same time the social aspects influence the meanings associated with the Internet.

ANT emphasizes the notion that technology is shaped within a heterogeneous network consisting of different actors and the technologies can in no case be viewed as stable. The technology operates within a dynamic network, and is changed in use. This means that we cannot expect the Internet to have the same effects in different socioeconomic situations. This claim may be linked to the notion of script inherent in ANT. Although the entrepreneurs inscribe different characteristics into the technology in the early stage of development, this is not necessarily understood as intentions within the technology itself. Intention is created in use, and the users change and reattribute the meanings associated with the Internet.
The use of the Internet in practice has revealed that it is not enough to expect the Internet to have social effect. Organizations are actors in the network and face restrictions present in the socioeconomic context, and the technology itself is shaped and reattributed through use. This mutuality is evident as most organizations acknowledge the Internet to facilitate exchange, but at the same time the meanings associated with the Internet are changed. Social change is not only a result of technical change, and optimal use is dependent on different technical and social abilities. The organizations shape the Internet through their experiences in practice. The use of ANT as a basis for the expectations, illustrates that actual usage is a result of both technical and social actors that co-produce each other. The replacement of technological determinism with ANT as a basis for the expectations concerning the use of the Internet may facilitate the acknowledgement that use of the Internet for global exchange of knowledge and information is not a straightforward matter.
Chapter 6- Concluding remarks

In light of the great utopian expectations connected to the uptake and use of the Internet, I have through this thesis revealed the variety of socioeconomic mechanisms determining the use of the Internet in practice. Different expectations are connected to the use of the Internet and may be classified according to a utopian or a dystopian view. The dominant ideology, inherent in the e-conference, is in many respects still a future telling and a simplistic account of the complexity involved in the use of the Internet. Through interviews and questionnaire the problems connected to the use of the Internet have been identified, and contributed to the questioning of the dominant view. The discrepancy between the expectations towards the e-conference and the actual experiences illustrates that the e-conference was based on a somehow naïve and simplistic theoretical approach. The dominant ideology, evident in both public rhetoric and the e-conference, has a long way to go. The use of the Internet in practice has proven to be much more complex than held by the deterministic expectations. Problems are still evident and serve as barriers towards the Internet as a public sphere. Non-participation is based on different reasons for non-use but almost all are identified as socioeconomic contextual mechanisms.

As stated by Woolgar (2002), the uptake and diffusion of the Internet is not uniform, rather contingent on restrictions and incentives present in the social context. This statement is reflected in my empirical material. In order to find out how the use of the Internet is experienced in practice, contextual mechanisms have to be taken into consideration and be identified. These mechanisms are decisive in how great expectations are transformed in practice.
The deterministic ideology inherent in the idea behind the e-conference may be a hindrance for the use of the Internet within a global network. The failure of the e-conference to generate participation reveals the limitations associated with the use of the Internet for exchange and communication within a global network.

What the e-conference uncovered about the Internet is that it does not in itself promote participation or create a public sphere with equal access. The Internet is part of a complex network constituting various actors, and the various socioeconomic mechanisms influence the uptake and usage of the technology. The deterministic utopian expectations towards technology are not reflected in this study of experiences with the Internet in practice. The Internet as a technology has its limitations, and these limitations are present in the socioeconomic context. The examination of the experiences with the use of the Internet in practice shows that the dominant view is not transformed in practice. Problems are evident in relation to the use of the Internet in a global perspective. The dominant view has not been realized due to identified problems present in the socioeconomic context.

In order to adjust the future expectations in accordance with real experiences, it is important to base the analysis on the practical usage of the Internet within complex socioeconomic contexts, and also acknowledge that the Internet is an actor in a complex network. The concluding remarks should be interpreted as indications of trends that give some insight and provide a foundation for further research and more realistic expectations.
Bibliography:


Available at: http://www.web.net/~robrien/papers/civsoc.html


**Online resources:**


Last found: 20.09.05


Last found: 20.09.05
Appendix A

Semi-structured interview guide

The 2001 e-conference:

How was the 2001 e-conference organized? Practical information on how the conference was set up.

What were the advantages and problems in relation to the use of the Internet as a way to generate participation in this e-conference?

Why the limited response rate?

General experiences with the use of the Internet in a global network:

To what extend do your organization use the Internet for communication with partner organization?

General experiences with the use of the Internet in a global network of development organizations.

What are your ideas about what the Internet can do that not other forms of communication can do?