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**‘ANOTHER U.S. IS NECESSARY’:  
PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM PROCESS  
BY U.S. CIVIL-SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS**

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*This paper examines awareness and perceptions of the World Social Forum (WSF) process among grassroots civil society organizations (CSOs) in the United States, aiming to shed light on relatively low U.S. participation and apparent disinterest in global social fora to date. Our data come from representatives of 248 U.S. CSOs, who in late 2008 completed an online survey comprising of both open-ended and quantitative questions. Nearly half (47.8%) of the CSOs in our sample were aware of the WSF. Regression analysis revealed four significant predictors of the WSF awareness: international contacts, organizational identity as a ‘social movement’, engagement in political campaigns, and broadband Internet access. The analysis of responses to open-ended questions reveals deep ambivalence about the horizontalist ethos and ideological decenteredness of the global justice movement, and about the use of social networking media such as Facebook for social justice organizing. The possible value of networks and high-speed Internet access are considered as crucial elements to promote the globalist critique of neoliberal capitalism and transnational solidarity thus far illusive to civil society in the United States.*

**Keywords:** *World Social Forum, globalization, social movements, United States, civil society, survey research.*

### **Introduction**

This paper examines awareness and perceptions of the World Social Forum (WSF) and its broader process of anti-corporate, global justice activism and dialogue among grassroots civil-society organizations (CSOs) in the United States. Our analysis is based on responses to an online survey conducted in late 2008 among the representatives of 248 U.S. organizations. The twin paradoxes that form the backdrop of our project are (a) the consistently low visibility of the U.S. CSOs in the World Social Forum during the period 2001–2008; and (b) the absence of a global critique of corporate-led capitalism in the discourses of many (if not most) U.S. CSOs.

### **The World Social Forum Process**

In less than a decade, the World Social Forum (WSF) and its ever-multiplying offshoots have emerged as the cutting-edge nexus for activist, scholarly, and policy debates about alternatives to the corporate, neoliberal model of globalization hegemonic in most of the today's world.<sup>1</sup> Fashioning itself as the grassroots, democratic counterpart to the elitist and unrepresentative World Economic Forum, the WSF's focus on horizontal dialogue and coordination between autonomous civil society groups (rather than the verti-

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cal command logics of the Old Left) and its utopian call to envision 'other possible worlds' have inspired a new generation of global justice activism around the world.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the challenge of theorizing the WSF process – its internal dynamics and discourses, its status as a possible 'global civil society' or 'global public sphere', and its promise for the development of viable alternatives to neoliberal globalization – has inspired a vibrant and growing body of social science scholarship.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the size and scale of the WSF meetings has continued to grow. The 2009 Forum in Belém, Brazil, brought together more than 100,000 activists, non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives, and independent-media journalists to dialogue around the consequences of multinational capital, third-world debt, and political and cultural imperialism, especially for environmental degradation and the violation of human rights.

Perhaps as striking as the growing significance of the World Social Forum process in international circles has been the apparent disinterest in the WSF among popular movements in the United States. Since the first WSF in 2001, the visibility of U.S. activists has remained consistently low and Forum workshops have seldom addressed socio-political struggle within the U.S. borders.<sup>4</sup> Beyond participation levels, relatively few grassroots civil-society organizations in the U.S. seem to have taken notice of the WSF in their newsletters, blogs, websites, and email listservs.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, the decline of the U.S. presence in the global justice movement since the Seattle mobilizations has been concurrent with an overall increase in protest activity during the same period (ANES 2008).<sup>6</sup>

While at present no systematic studies have addressed the apparently low awareness of and interest in the WSF process by the U.S. CSOs, several proximate and background factors seem probable. In part, the lack of interest and awareness may be the reflection of the WSF's own distinctive organizational history, namely, the absence of U.S. activists in early brainstorming and planning.<sup>7, 8</sup> In addition, the coverage of the WSF in U.S. mainstream and corporate media has been almost non-existent, reflecting a long pattern of inattention to global inter-dependencies and to the global effects of the U.S. policies (Smith and Juris 2008: 378).<sup>9</sup> For the U.S. groups that are aware of the WSF, attendance at international meetings in faraway locales such as South America, India, and Africa is no doubt often cost-prohibitive. Even with awareness of the WSF, it is perhaps no great surprise that many U.S. groups would take little interest in the anti-corporate globalization movements for which the Forum has been a catalyst. This stems from the historically domestic orientation of many U.S. movements (Hadden and Tarrow 2007) and the absence of a critique of global, corporate-led capitalism within U.S. political culture in general, due to a great extent to the legacy of Cold War repression of radicals and communists (leading, *e.g.*, to the embrace of a pro-business model by unions [Clawson 2003; Fletcher and Gapasin 2008, as cited in Smith and Juris 2008: 378]).

These legacies continue to limit the resonance of anti-capitalist discourses and to support an ideological focus on individualism over solidarity. The effects of this climate are also evident in the stark avoidance of discussion of alternatives to capitalism among U.S. political elites.<sup>10</sup> As scholars Hadden and Tarrow argue, this orientation has intensified in the post-9/11 years due to the increasingly repressive styles of protest policing under the rubric of 'homeland security', and the 'spillover' of transnational activism into domestic anti-war protest.<sup>11</sup> By the same token, protest since 9/11 has actually decreased in the U.S., in contrast to Western European settings (Podobnik 2005).

### The 2007 United States Social Forum

Given a history of under-participation in the WSF process by the U.S.-based grassroots groups, much anticipation surrounded the first United States Social Forum, held in Atlanta, Georgia in late June of 2007. In terms of sheer numbers, the event was impressive: More than 12,000 registered delegates representing more than a thousand organizations (from every U.S. state as well as delegations from Guam, Puerto Rico, and 64 other countries) participated for four days in plenaries, workshops, and cultural events which, according to the USSF's hardcopy onsite program, were designed to encourage participants 'to share, reflect, sing, play, debate, raise consciousness, dance, vision, and strategize on [their] way to making another U.S. and another world possible'. Myriad movements were represented, including those dealing with peace, poverty, labor, the environment, and housing, as well as the plights and rights of indigenous people, African Americans, women, and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered people.<sup>12</sup>

The organizers of the 2007 USSF embraced the WSF's Charter of Principles, particularly the focus on 'free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action', and explicitly aimed for a gathering which would help integrate U.S. activists into the broader WSF process (Smith and Juris 2008: 374).<sup>13</sup> While somewhat successful in promoting horizontalist dialogue and inter-movement connections (*Ibid.*: 387), international perspectives were mostly limited to the Forum's nightly plenary sessions (which were global and explicitly organized to expand the political imaginations of the U.S. activists). In daytime workshops organized by grassroots delegates, such perspectives were extremely rare and explicit critique of the neoliberal model of global capitalism was minimal,<sup>14</sup> leading researchers Smith and Juris to conclude that the USSF had brought about 'a relatively weak internalization of the global forum process' (*Ibid.*: 388).<sup>15</sup> By the same token, for its size, diversity, and vibrancy, the first USSF was an extraordinary gathering and combined with the appearance of sub-regional social fora around the country,<sup>16</sup> seemed to suggest that inter-movement solidarity and global consciousness were on the rise within the U.S. civil society.

### The 2008 Day of Action

In their attempts to increase participation (especially given the high costs of international air travel), the international council responsible for the 2008 WSF made use of a novel organizational model: an online 'day of action'. Rather than meeting in one location, the 2008 forum, to take place on January 28, would be polycentric and comprised of local actions organized concurrently around the world. Local organizers were encouraged to post their mobilizations on a global map found on the official WSF website, with the objective that local action combined with global solidarity and dialogue would further the WSF's goals while respecting participating groups' autonomy and the principle of decentralization. In the absence of a centralized plan to promote the event, groups around the world spread the word through computer-based media such as email listservs, websites, and blogs. In the end, several hundred organizations posted their actions on the online map. Despite the enthusiasm generated in Atlanta just eight months earlier, however, only *twenty-eight* U.S. groups posted an action for the 2008 online Day of Action.

Taken together, the background narratives above point to several possible explanations for the relative under-participation of the U.S. civil society groups in the anti-

corporate, anti-neoliberal globalization movements emerging during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and exemplified in the World Social Forum. Among the most likely suspects are the lack of awareness of the WSF and, among groups that know about it, the lack of funding to attend. It may also be, however, that the U.S. groups are *less interested and less invested* in the WSF's critique of globalization than their civil society counterparts elsewhere in the world. Finally, the growing importance of computer-based communication media in the global justice movement (as with the 2008 Day of Action's reliance on a centralized website to document hundreds of global actions) suggests that the Internet itself may have something to do with how U.S. groups understand the WSF process.<sup>17</sup> Our study examines the possible influence of each of these factors.

### Research Methodology

Our overall research goal was to gauge awareness and characterize perceptions of the World Social Forum process among grassroots CSOs in the U.S. To this end, we developed and implemented an anonymous online survey, using the 'Survey Monkey' platform (Finley *n.d.*), during a six-month period starting in November 2008.<sup>18</sup> To recruit grassroots civil society organizations, we used direct email invitations and indirect announcements on civil-society listservs, offering entry into a drawing for an Amazon.com gift certificate as an incentive to participate. To make contact, we emailed all U.S.-based CSOs listed in publicly available databases such as those of the Orion Grassroots Network and the United Nations Department of Public Information / NGO Network. (We restricted our invitations to those CSOs for whom an email address was listed.) In addition, we joined more than 200 listservs from the grassroots clearinghouse Riseup.Net in order to post invitations to complete our survey. (In these invitations, we invited the participation of 'grassroots groups working on issues related to social justice'.) Finally, the U.S. Social Forum's Executive Committee graciously agreed to forward our invitation to official USSF work groups and to post it on the USSF website. Subtracting returned emails, we sent direct email invitations to roughly 2,800 CSOs.

In the end, the representatives of 248 U.S.-based CSOs completed our survey, leading us to estimate an 8.5 % response rate. Designed and piloted to be short (15–20 minutes), the survey was divided into five sections: (a) the CSO institutional profile and priorities; (b) office and computer infrastructure; (c) understandings of globalization and democracy; (d) awareness and perceptions of the World Social Forum process; and (e) awareness and perceptions of the 2008 Day of Action.

To characterize each CSO's institutional profile and priorities, we included questions about the region where the group focuses its work, whether the locale is primarily urban, rural, or both, when the organization was founded, the organization's main areas of action and target communities, and the organization's international contacts and participation in global justice networks. Office and computer infrastructure are characterized in terms of number of full-time employees, annual budget, physical office space, number of computers owned, operating system used, broadband Internet access, usage of an official website, and use of computer-supported communication. To gauge each CSO's understanding of globalization and democracy, we provided a list of possible definitions and asked the respondent to select the three options which best corresponded to his or her CSO's understanding of the given term. We intentionally included in each list definitions with both positive and negative valence.

To examine awareness and perceptions of the World Social Forum process, we first asked if the respondent had heard of the WSF. For those who indicated they had, we asked about familiarity with the WSF Charter of Principles (indicative of a deeper familiarity than simply having heard of the forum), past participation in the WSF, intention to attend the January 2009 WSF in Belém, past participation in the 2007 U.S. Social Forum, and participation in other social fora or global justice summits. We then provided a list of possible descriptions of the WSF and asked the respondent to select any that matched his or her own understandings. We also asked that respondents rate their level of agreement (using a five-point Likert scale) with two normative statements about the WSF (regarding the need for the U.S.-based CSOs to participate in it and its accessibility). (Responses were collapsed into a dichotomous agree/disagree variable.) Respondents were also asked about the awareness of the January 2008 WSF's Day of Action and, if aware of it, about their participation in and perceptions of it. Finally, we included open-ended questions to elicit reflections on the use of computers and the Internet among grassroots organizers and on social fora (including the WSF and USSF).

For our analysis, we hypothesized that CSOs with an international dimension to official activities and priorities, with international contacts, with a larger budget, with more computers, and with broadband Internet access would be more likely to know about the World Social Forum.

Quantitative variables are summarized using descriptive techniques (*e.g.*, frequency distributions), with sub-group differences cross-tabulated using a chi-square test for discrete variables; associations are taken as significant at  $p < 0.100$ . Those variables which come up as significant in initial cross-tabulations are included as independent variables in a binary logistic regression model (with awareness of the WSF as the dependent variable). Responses to open-ended questions are used in the discussion section to help interpret quantitative findings regarding awareness and understandings of the WSF and the USSF, as well as of computer-supported communication and the Internet.

## Results

### *Institutional Characteristics* (Table 1)

Our sample contained 248 CSOs from all four U.S. geographic regions, although a higher proportion was from the northeast (45.0 %) and the west (26.5 %), in comparison with the south (17.6 %) and midwest (10.9 %). Most organizations (62.1 %) in our sample work in both rural and urban areas, with 26.0 % and 11.9 % working exclusively in urban and rural areas, respectively. Most CSOs (70.3 %) were founded since the 1990s and most (61.3 %) are registered non-profit organizations. When respondents were asked to characterize their CSO (selecting as many options as they deemed appropriate), the most common responses were 'social movement' (33.9 %), 'network/coalitions/campaign/forum' (28.6 %), and 'non-governmental organization' (27.0 %). Most common areas of action were activism/advocacy (58.1 %), education (37.9 %), public policy (25.8 %), public demonstrations/marches/strikes (18.1 %), and agriculture/land issues (17.7 %). CSOs work with a range of populations and communities, the most common being the environment (36.5 %), poor people (32.3 %), ethnic/racial minorities (29.0 %), youth (28.2 %), and women (25.8 %). About two-fifths (38.0 %) reported international dimensions to CSO activities, with a slightly higher proportion (44.1 %) reporting international contacts, and about a quarter (23.4 %) reporting membership in global justice networks.

Table 1

## CSO Profile

Variable	<i>n</i>	%		
US Region	West	63	26.5	
	Midwest	26	10.9	
	South	42	17.6	
	Northeast	107	45.0	
Area focus of CSO activities	Rural	28	11.9	
	Urban	61	26.0	
	Both	146	62.1	
Year CSO founded	2000s	102	45.1	
	1990s	57	25.2	
	1980s	29	12.8	
	1970s	16	7.1	
	Before 1970	22	9.8	
Type of CSO	Registered non-profit	122	61.3	
	Cooperative	23	9.3	
	International cooperation agency	2	0.8	
	Network/coalition/campaign/forum	71	28.6	
	Non-governmental organization	67	27.0	
	Professional association	5	2.0	
	Religious/ecumenical association	21	8.5	
	Research center/university	11	4.4	
	Social movement	84	33.9	
	Trade union	6	2.4	
	CSO's main areas of action*	Academic research	22	8.9
Activism/advocacy		144	58.1	
Agriculture/land issues		44	17.7	
Art and culture		22	8.9	
Combating discrimination		31	12.5	
Education		94	37.9	
Meetings		30	12.1	
Political campaigns		18	7.3	
Public demonstrations/marches/strikes		45	18.1	
Public policy		64	25.8	
Social assistance, service provision		43	17.3	
CSO's target populations		Ethnic/racial minorities	72	29.0
		Farmers	46	18.5
	Homeless people	29	11.7	
	Indigenous people	35	14.1	
	LGBTQ people	38	15.3	
	Migrants	28	11.3	
	Poor people	80	32.3	
	The environment	91	36.7	
	Women	64	25.8	
	Workers	46	18.5	
	Youth	70	28.2	
International dimension to CSO activities and priorities?	Yes	90	38.0	
Does CSO have international contacts?	Yes	104	44.1	
Member of global justice networks?	Yes	58	23.4	

Note: \* Respondent directed to select up to three responses.

*Office and Computer Infrastructure* (Table 2)

CSOs in our sample reported small staffs, with a median of one full-time employee. Nearly a quarter (24.9 %) are all-volunteer, and budgets range from small- to large-scale, with 16.2 % reporting budgets of more than \$500,000. Most CSOs (62.4 %) have a physical office space, and nearly three-quarters (71.9 %) have computers. Among those organizations with computers, most use Windows (75.6 %), most (93.7 %) have broadband Internet access, and most have an official institutional website (84.0 %). CSOs use a variety of forms of computer-supported communication, the most common being email listservs (64.1 %), online content sharing (32.3 %), blogs (32.3 %), Facebook (30.6 %), and MySpace (16.1 %).

*Understandings of Globalization and Democracy* (Table 3)

When asked to select up to three characterizations of globalization from a list of six options, respondents most commonly chose 'the possibility of joining or connecting societies on a planetary level' (43.1 %), followed by 'domination of the world by capital, commanded by large corporations' (39.9 %), and 'the concentration of wealth that makes the rich richer and the poor poorer' (25.5 %). For 'democracy', the most common responses were 'representative government' (42.7 %), 'free, fair and open elections' (35.9 %), and 'a vibrant civil society' (28.6 %).

Table 2

**Office and computer infrastructure (n = 248)**

Variable		n	%
1		2	3
Full-time employees	mean/median	121.5	1.0
	Min/max	0	16,000
Annual budget	All volunteer	49	24.9
	Less than \$1,000	14	7.1
	\$1,001–\$10,000	24	12.2
	\$10,001–\$100,000	36	18.3
	\$100,001–\$500,000	42	21.3
	More than \$500,000	32	16.2
CSO has physical office space?	Yes	128	62.4
CSO owns computers?	Yes	146	71.9
Operating system	Windows	99	75.6
	Mac OS	20	15.3
	Other	12	8.2
Do most computers have broadband Internet access?	Yes	133	93.7
Does CSO have an official website?	Yes	168	84.0
Website maintained regularly? (n = 168)	Yes	140	84.8
Use of computer-supported communication	Email listservs	159	64.1
	Text messaging	29	11.7
	Instant messenger	23	9.3
	Online virtual world	2	8
	Online content sharing	80	32.3
	RSS feed	27	10.9
	Wiki-page	38	15.3
	Independent media (IMC)	18	7.3
	Blog	80	32.3
	Facebook	76	30.6

Table 2 continued

1	2	3	
	MySpace	40	16.1
	LinkedIn	23	9.3
	HI5	3	1.2
	Twitter	12	4.8

Table 3

**Understandings of globalization and democracy (n = 248)**

Variable	n	%
Meaning of 'globalization'*		
The possibility of joining or connecting societies on planetary level (+)	107	43.1
Domination of world by capital, commanded by large corporations (-)	99	39.9
Concentration of wealth that makes the rich richer and poor poorer (-)	62	25.0
A new name for imperialism (-)	60	24.2
Greater access to goods and services (+)	48	19.4
More opportunity for all, rich and poor (+)	34	13.7
At least one positive reading of 'globalization'	123	49.6
At least one negative reading of 'globalization'	114	46.0
Meaning of 'democracy'*		
Representative government (+)	106	42.7
Free, fair and open elections (+)	89	35.9
A vibrant civil society (+)	71	28.6
Equality before the law (+)	66	26.6
Liberty and freedoms (+)	65	26.2
An ideal that doesn't translate into reality (-)	37	14.9
Popular sovereignty (+)	32	12.9
A new tyranny (-)	9	3.6
At least one positive reading of 'democracy'	173	69.8
At least one negative reading of 'democracy'	42	16.9

Note: \* Respondent directed to select up to three responses.

*WSF Awareness, Participation, and Perceptions* (Table 4)

Slightly less than half of respondents (47.8 %) were aware of the World Social Forum. Among those who were familiar, less than half (49.4 %) were familiar with the WSF's Charter of Principles. Few (16.9 %) had attended any WSF, although two-fifths (40.3 %) had participated in other social fora and 17.8% had attended other global justice summits. About 30 % (30.1 %) attended the 2007 US Social Forum in Atlanta. When asked to characterize the WSF, the most commonly selected options were 'developing alternatives to neoliberal globalization' (51.7 %), 'making contacts with other groups and networks' (41.6 %), and 'building another world' (33.7 %). Respondents expressed moderately high (67.4 %) agreement with the proposition that grassroots social-justice organizations in the U.S. should participate in the WSF. However, most (78.7 %) disagreed with the statement that the WSF is accessible to most grassroots groups. Less than a third (29.1 %) knew about the January 2008 WSF's Day of Action and, of those who were aware, five groups or 20 % reported having organized an action for it. Only two groups in our entire sample of 248 CSOs both organized an action and subsequently posted it on the official WSF website.

Table 4

## WSF awareness, participation and perceptions (n = 248)

Variable		n	%
Familiar with the World Social Forum?	Yes	89	47.8
<i>For sub-sample familiar with WSF (n = 89)</i>			
Familiar with WSF Charter of Principles?	Yes	42	49.4
Participated in any WSF (2001–2007)?	Yes	15	16.9
Intend to participate in January 2009 WSF in Belém?	Yes	1	1.7
Participated in 2007 USSF?	Yes	25	30.1
Participated in other social fora?	Yes	29	40.3
Participated in other global justice summits?	Yes	13	17.8
Which of the following best describes the WSF?			
Developing alternatives to neoliberal globalization		46	51.7
Making contacts with other groups and networks		37	41.6
Building another world		30	33.7
Learning from the experiences of other groups who do similar work		26	29.2
Promoting human rights		25	28.1
Participatory democracy		17	19.1
Sharing your organization/project/program's experiences with others		16	18.0
Democratic debate within civil society		14	15.7
Opposing transnational corporations		11	12.4
'Grassroots social justice organizations in the U.S. should participate in the World Social Forum.'	Agree	60	67.4
	Disagree	29	22.6
'The World Social Forum is accessible to most grassroots social justice organizations.'	Agree	19	21.3
	Disagree	70	78.7
Familiar with the 2008 WSF's Day of Action?	Yes	25	29.1
<i>For sub-sample familiar with 2008 WSF (n = 25)</i>			
Organized or co-organized an action for the 2008 WSF?	Yes	5	20.0
<i>For sub-sample who organized an action (n = 5)</i>			
Posted action on official WSF website (map)?	Yes	2	40.0
'The online format for the 2008 Day of Action was beneficial and should be repeated in the future.'	Agree	2	40.0
	Disagree	3	60.0

*Predictors of WSF Awareness* (Table 5)

From chi-square cross-tabulations, the following CSO characteristics were positively associated with awareness of the WSF at a significance level of at least  $p = 0.100$ : has international contacts; most computers have broadband Internet access; identifies as a cooperative or social movement; organizes activism/advocacy, meetings, political campaigns, or public demonstrations/marches/strikes; works with migrants or workers; and uses email listservs, online content sharing, or Indymedia. These variables were subsequently entered into a binary logistic regression model, and four characteristics emerged as significant predictors of WSF awareness (Table 5). First, CSOs with international contacts were 2.3 times as likely to be aware of the WSF as those without ( $p = 0.049$ ); CSOs which chose 'social movement' to describe themselves were 3.7 times as likely ( $p = 0.013$ ); Organizations which engage in political campaigns were 5.2 times as likely ( $p = 0.074$ ); and CSOs with broadband Internet access were fully 18.8 times more likely to be aware of the WSF than those without ( $p = 0.029$ ).

Table 5

**Predictors of WSF awareness (characteristics of respondent CSOs)**

Independent Variable	B	S.E.	<i>p</i> value	O.R.
Has contacts with similar groups in other countries	0.843	0.429	0.049	2.324
Considers itself to be part of a social movement	1.317	0.528	0.013	3.733
Engages in political campaigns	1.650	0.923	0.074	5.207
Most computers have broadband Internet access	2.935	1.341	0.029	18.817

**Discussion***Institutional Characteristics*

The civil-society organizations making up our sample were heterogeneous with respect to institutional identity, activities, and communities served. Regarding programmatic activities, it is noteworthy that the more than half of our sample engages in activism and advocacy, and many have a strong emphasis on education, policy, and direct action (demonstrations, marches, strikes, *etc.*). We also note that environmental concerns, poverty, racial/ethnic inequality, youth, and gender figured prominently among our sample's institutional priorities (with comparatively low attention to sexual minorities, homeless people, and indigenous people). The activities of our sample organizations do not typically extend internationally, with a minority reporting activities or contacts in other countries, or membership in international networks.

While a small minority of our sample has large budgets, the more typical profile is that of a small organization which is more reliant on volunteers than paid employees. While a statistical majority of organizations have their own physical office space, nearly half do not, underscoring the precariousness of many groups' infrastructural stability. By the same token, it is notable that more than three-quarters of groups have computers, the vast majority with broadband (high-speed) Internet access. Also taking into consideration the preponderance of groups possessing websites, and the heavy use of email listservs, this appears to a relatively 'wired' group of grassroots organizations. At the same time, less than one-third use social networking sites (such as Facebook or MySpace) or blogs, suggesting that most groups in our sample are not making regular use of cutting-edge forms of computer-supported communication.

*Understandings of Globalization and Democracy*

Interpreting responses to our survey question about the possible meanings of 'globalization' requires caution and inevitably entails some speculation. Nonetheless, we believe that our findings tell an interesting story. That 'the possibility of joining or connecting societies on a planetary level' – a proposition with neutral or positive valence – was the most commonly selected response option suggests that, within this sample, 'globalization' is not primarily – or at least not *solely* – a 'bad' word. It implies, in other words, that many CSOs are comfortable with a positive reading of the concept. This finding should serve as a caution to scholars of U.S. social movements against presuming that even groups who know about and participate in the WSF are ideologically 'anti-globalization'. That the next three most-commonly chosen response options were of clearly negative valence, however, indicates that the term 'globalization' is polyvalent and can be used to reference contradictory meanings – or, perhaps better stated, that respondents are familiar with, and able to reproduce, the meaning of 'globalization' as taken up in a variety of discourses. It would be an interesting area for future research to learn more

about which globalization discourses CSOs have encountered and internalized. Since our data were collected before the effects of the global economic crisis were fully manifest, it would also be important for future studies to examine whether the crisis has contributed to a deeper and more explicit critique of economic globalization in the discourses of U.S. CSOs.

When we cross-tabulated the presence of at least one negative reading of 'globalization' by awareness of the World Social Forum, the results were noteworthy. Among those aware of the WSF, 79.5 % selected at least one negative meaning for 'globalization' while only 52.1 % of those not familiar with the WSF did so ( $p < .001$ ). While we make no argument regarding causality, it is clear that those U.S. CSOs that are aware of the World Social Forum have a more critical understanding of 'globalization' than those who are not familiar with the WSF. Given the association we have shown between WSF awareness and participation in an international network, it seems plausible that such networks serve as a pathway to a critique of globalization.

In contrast to 'globalization', our findings suggest that 'democracy' has positive connotations for the majority (nearly 70 %) of our respondents. While reluctant to over-interpret the order of popularity of each response option, it is notable that 'democracy' is most strongly associated with institutional arrangements (*i.e.* government and elections) over principles of inclusion, freedom, and equality.

#### *WSF Awareness, Participation, and Perceptions*

We are encouraged to find that despite a virtual blackout in mainstream media to date, nearly half of our sample indicated awareness of the World Social Forum, albeit with a minority indicating familiarity with the WSF's Charter of Principles. (Hence, we find that only one-quarter of our broader sample possesses substantive familiarity with the WSF.) This suggests to us that alternative communications networks have been able to thwart marginalization from mainstream media. It also, however, points to the obvious need to more successfully get the word out through effective strategies to catch the attention of mainstream mass media, through formal inter-movement and inter-group communication, and through informal individual- and grassroots-level interaction. In future studies, it would be worthwhile to learn how the CSOs with knowledge of the WSF have acquired and circulated that knowledge.

In our regression analysis, the four variables which significantly predicted WSF awareness merit special consideration. First, as hypothesized, we found that the CSOs with international contacts are more than twice as likely to be aware of the WSF. As it turns out, such contacts appear to be more relevant to WSF awareness than actually carrying out programmatic activities in other countries, a pattern which likely reflects the importance of transnational communication networks as information hubs for the global justice movement. We also note that 'social movement' emerges in our analysis as a significant category of identification for respondents who are aware of the WSF. Given that this term to date has had little resonance within U.S. civil society (Smith and Juris 2008: 379), it will be interesting to see if growing interest and participation in the WSF process in the years to come facilitates transformation in the lexicon by which CSOs in the U.S. classify themselves as such.

Somewhat curiously, our regression analysis also reveals engagement in political campaigns as a significant predictor of WSF awareness. While the numbers here are small (only 18 CSOs out of 248 selected this option as a main area of action), they

nonetheless raise the possibility that, unlike in most countries of the global South, the WSF may be attracting U.S. grassroots groups which directly engage electoral politics. (We treat this as a speculative hypothesis to be explored in future research.)

Finally, the regression analysis shows that, rather than institutional budget and computer infrastructure, broadband Internet access is far and away the most important factor in awareness of the WSF. (Hence, volunteer-based CSOs with tiny budgets were just as likely to know about the WSF as large NGOs, provided that they have broadband Internet access.) Once again, the explanation appears to be the range of communicative networks and information sources made possible with broadband access.

Among the sub-sample of CSOs aware of the WSF, we were encouraged to find measurable sub-groups (generally around a third) who had participated in some type of social forum or global justice summit. That 30 % of this sub-sample (10 % of the complete sample) attended the 2007 USSF is notable and suggests that the local, regional, and global social fora making up the broader WSF process (and driven in large part by alternative communication networks) can succeed in overcoming the problem of accessibility.<sup>19</sup> In a separate analysis, we found that CSOs who work with communities of color were more likely to have attended the 2007 USSF (41.4 % vs. 23.6 %,  $p = .076$ ), a finding which complements Juris's observation that this forum was unprecedentedly welcoming to people of color (Juris 2008: 354).

To characterize the WSF, sub-sample respondents most commonly selected descriptive statements which are compatible with the ideals expressed in the WSF's Charter of Principles (*i.e.*, alternatives to neoliberalism, horizontal contact among CSOs, building 'another world', *etc.*). Perhaps the most noteworthy finding here is the least commonly selected statement – 'opposing transnational corporations' – which we see as a reflection of U.S. CSOs' comparatively weak awareness of and interest in the possible ill effects of transnational corporate economic development. While our findings indicate that many CSOs think the WSF is worth attending, most do not find it accessible to grassroots groups. In responses to our open-ended questions, 'accessibility' was expressed both in terms of information and funding, as in the following two responses:

The World Social Forum needs to advertise more! We often do not receive information!

Although the WSF is a great idea, in theory, it requires that an organization have monetary resources that just don't exist for most grassroots groups.

The second quote above expresses a sentiment which appeared frequently in our qualitative data: that the WSF is associated with a certain conception of NGOs as well-funded, corporate in structure, and heavy on infrastructure.

Regarding the 2008 online WSF/Day of Action, our data indicate moderately low awareness, low levels of mobilization among those aware, and extremely low levels of utilization of the website platform among those who mobilized. In responses to an open-ended question about whether the CSO considered organizing an action for the Day of Action, staffing concerns, time conflicts, and a perceived disconnect between the direct-action format of the Day of Action and the CSO's own identity (often expressed as 'non-political') were prominent. A handful of respondents also expressed frustration that the Day of Action's vision did not seem coherent or unified, as in the following response from the representative of a non-participating CSO:

The mobilization had no clear point, the website and email alerts were very poorly presented and incredibly inaccessible. As much as I admire the WSF tradition and history, the mobilization itself did not give me or those I work with anything much to work with, or much confidence in those coordinating it (I don't know who they were. They might be friends of mine, for all I know).

The sentiment above seems to reflect discomfort with the highly decentralized format of the 2008 Day of Action. Possibly, it may also reflect a tension with the WSF's ideological rejection of 'monolithic thought'<sup>20</sup> and the formation of a unified political platform. Whereas inter-movement coalition-building in the U.S. has historically been issue-based, the WSF encourages a more diffuse and explicitly horizontal form of solidarity, which may not (yet?) appeal to the sensibility of most U.S.-based CSOs.<sup>21</sup> Tension around this vision was also apparent in one respondent's statement about the 2007 USSF:

It felt like there wasn't much strategy and it brought together a lot of self-righteous folks who have good intentions but have not truly thought about what building an inclusive and effective movement might look like.

Since so few (two) CSOs within our sample posted a write-up of their mobilization for the 2008 Day of Action on the WSF website, we have limited qualitative data. Responses given, however, suggest that some groups were genuinely excited at the prospect of linking their local foci to broader struggles and to feel a sense of belonging in a trans-regional and trans-national movement, as expressed in the following response:

As an active group in Grassroots Global Justice, and as an active participant in many Social Forums, we were interested in taking our politicization in this context to the next level and being part of a global day of action. We figured out how to connect it to local issues but felt connected to a broader global movement as we carried out our action.

#### *The Role of Computers and the Internet*

While none of the groups who participated in the 2008 Day of Action commented specifically on the role of computers and the Internet in their mobilization and follow-up, these themes did emerge frequently in other contexts. For many respondents, the Internet has been an overwhelmingly positive force in social movement organizing:

The Internet has hugely increased our capacity to do our work and has dramatically changed the face of social movement organizing.

The Internet is an invaluable means of communicating with other groups, members of the networks we belong to, sharing research, news, upcoming events.

Computers can be useful in making information accessible quickly and easily to us and to students, including downloadable brochures, archives of articles on our issues, contact and communication among groups, and occasional online conferences or conference calls. Email is our predominant mode of communication.

The following response points to the more practical (and financial) aspects of optimizing Internet use for social-movement organizing, not to mention the important generational implications to computer use:

The Internet is a great tool, but it requires human capital! The biggest struggle we face as an organization is dedicated human capital, such as to keep

the website up to date. The Internet also requires willingness on the part of organization members. The younger members, like myself, are fairly Internet-savvy and willing to use tools like wikis. The older members are not so willing.

Other respondents expressed outright critique of computer-based communication among social movement organizers, especially insofar as it diminishes face-to-face interaction:

The Internet is a very interesting tool that can cause as much dissolution as progress in a social movement. Less reliance needs to be placed on it and we need to come back to organizing at the local level, the town square, the village green, face-to-face.

The over-reliance on blogs, listservs and social networking has been a disaster for movement organizing, to such a degree that I find myself pondering the possibility that the Internet is being tailored by its corporate owners to channel dissent into non-disruptive modes that actually expand consumerism... People have ceased organizing and instead have become desk-bound pundits. Computer technology should not be used in organizing as anything but a super-telephone, directory, and information clearing-house.

While this last set of quotes does not definitively explain the low participation by U.S. CSOs in the 2008 WSF/Day of Action, it evocatively underscores the diversity of sentiment surrounding Internet and computer usage among grassroots organizations.

### **Conclusions**

In this paper, we have attempted to gauge awareness and understandings of the World Social Forum process among a sample of U.S.-based civil-society organizations. Our analysis and the interpretation of its findings have been subject to a handful of constraints. First, we make no claim that our sample of 248 CSOs is representative of U.S. civil society as a whole. Indeed, given that our recruitment materials targeted 'grassroots' organizations, and specified priority survey themes to be 'globalization and the Internet', some movement sectors may have found our project less appealing than others. The under-representation of unions, in particular, would seem to mirror a pattern seen at the 2007 USSF, which Juris attributes to that forum's similarly 'grassroots'-oriented identity (Juris 2008: 360). We also note the possibility that our methodology excluded activists (perhaps especially anarchists) without group affiliations. It also seems likely that our study disproportionately attracted individuals and organizations with an interest in transnational and global dimensions to organizing, with a progressive stance on matters of social justice, and with access to the Internet (since the survey could not otherwise be completed). Finally, our study design used a cross-sectional approach in order to generate a snapshot of patterns of awareness and perception specific to the time period during which data were collected (the fall of 2008), rather than a longitudinal examination of change over time.

These limitations notwithstanding, we believe our findings shed important new light on prospects for greater inclusion in the WSF process for U.S. civil society. In many ways, our data reflect the patterns observed by Juris at the 2007 USSF, namely, that U.S.-based CSOs tend to be issue- and identity-based, and are less comfortable with the 'horizontalist' ethos of the global justice movement than their counterparts in

Europe and the global South. Our qualitative data, in particular, indicate that many U.S. CSOs – even when aware of the WSF – do not quite know what to make of a ‘movement of movements’ which has neither a unified ideological platform (other than a putatively shared critique of neoliberalism) nor a centralized advertising agency. Taken together, we view our findings as reflective of the broader trends identified by Hadden and Tarrow (2007) for U.S. CSOs, namely, a domestic orientation to civil society sectors. We also see in our findings minimal evidence of a critique of representative democracy within the discourses of CSOs (contrasting sharply with social movement sectors in Western Europe and the global South).

At the same time, our study reveals an impressive level of awareness of the WSF (nearly half of our sample), and not insignificant level of participation at other social fora. The significant association we have shown between membership in international networks and WSF awareness underscores the crucial role of coalition formation in the global justice movement (Hadden and Tarrow 2007: 364; Levi and Murphy 2006), and the association with broadband-Internet access suggests an important role for computer-supported communication media in promoting greater inclusion of U.S. CSOs in the WSF process. These two elements – networks and high-speed Internet access – may prove to be the crucial elements to promote the globalist critique of neoliberal capitalism and transnational solidarity thus far illusive to civil society in the United States. As social-movement scholars consider the meanings and implications of the currently-unfolding ‘Occupy Wall Street’ protests, this prospect hangs in the balance.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The growing global justice movement is not, of course, limited to the World Social Forum and its multiple regional social fora (cf. Juris 2008). Rather, the WSF process is taken as a privileged focal point within the movements against corporate, neoliberal globalization.

<sup>2</sup> For a historical account about the emergence of ‘horizontalism’, see Sitrin (2005: vi).

<sup>3</sup> For a sample of WSF scholarship covering these themes, see Bello 2008; Conway 2004; dos Santos 2008; Fisher and Ponniah 2004; Hammond 2006; Patomaki and Teivainen 2004; Sen *et al.* 2004; Smith 2008; Smith, della Porta, and Mosca 2007; and Wallerstein 2007.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that relative to other countries, the U.S. delegations at the WSF have not been small. At the 2005 WSF in Porto Alegre, nearly 8 % of registered attendees were from the United States (Chase-Dunn *et al.* 2008). Most of these delegations, however, were from international, U.S.-based NGOs with large annual budgets and, as stated above, with comparatively minimal visibility in the programmatic activities. When national population size is controlled for, however, European participation in the WSF as 2.5 times higher than for U.S. groups (Hadden and Tarrow 2007: 363).

<sup>5</sup> To be clear, U.S.-based global justice NGOs and independent media journalists have both attended and reported on the WSFs. What has to date been missing is for grassroots organizations linked to the major U.S. social movements to take an official interest in the WSF process.

<sup>6</sup> Following Hadden and Tarrow, we understand 'global justice movement' to refer to 'campaigns of mobilization against global or transnational neoliberalism or its agents, taking place against the policies of international financial institutions or their meetings; against regional economic compacts and summits; and global or regional social forums directed against global neoliberalism' (Hadden and Tarrow 2007: 361).

<sup>7</sup> The idea for a grassroots anti-corporate globalization summit first emerged in February 2000, in the aftermath of the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, out of dialogue between Brazilian activists Oded Grajew and Chico Whitaker, and ATTAC-France president Bernard Cassen.

<sup>8</sup> In part, this reflects an explicit attempt in the WSF (for both ideological and practical reasons) to privilege voices of the Global South, that is of peripheral and semi-peripheral rather than core nations. (This same dynamics is at work in the U.S. Social Forum, *i.e.* privileging the margins or making an explicit attempt to draw in those most marginalized by globalization.) Part of the inattention to U.S. civil society by early WSF organizing committees may also reflect the anti-U.S. sentiment pervading global justice activism during George W. Bush's two terms (2001–2008).

<sup>9</sup> The 2009 WSF in Belém, for example, was ignored entirely by network television news, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, even as all of these provided ample coverage of the World Economic Forum taking place concurrently.

<sup>10</sup> See della Porta *et al.* 2006 for contrastive case studies in Europe.

<sup>11</sup> Building on Reitan's (2007) notion of 'spillover', Hadden and Tarrow (2007) have coined the term 'spillout' to refer to the emptying out (rather than simply overflowing) of global justice activism into domestically oriented protest.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the Atlanta USSF has been regarded as extraordinary for the diversity of participants (from various levels of privilege) it brought together (Guerrero 2008; Ponniah 2008).

<sup>13</sup> The WSF Charter of Principles can be viewed at [http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id\\_menu=4&cd\\_language=2](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=2)

<sup>14</sup> In a separate study, we analyzed USSF rhetorics through content analysis of the forum's official website, final program, banner slogans, and speeches delivered at the closing 'People's Movement Assembly' (data not published). Our findings, briefly, were: (a) that despite USSF's origins in the World Social Forum, almost none of its participants mentioned the WSF; (b) that the concept of neoliberalism appears explicitly in the discourses of only a small minority of participating organizations; and (c) that although the USSF slogan calls for 'another United States', its attendees seemed primarily interested in local struggles and local solutions rather than a national or transnational perspective (cf. Hadden and Tarrow 2007: 365).

<sup>15</sup> 'Internalization' in this context refers to a 'downward scale shift' linking the WSF's critique of neoliberalism to local, nationally or regionally framed issues and mobilizations.

<sup>16</sup> Beginning with the Boston Social Forum (July 23–25, 2004), regional fora have begun to appear around the United States, most recently at the Lower Hudson Valley Social Forum (March 27–28, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> See Bevington and Dixon (2005: 194); Mueller, Pagé, and Kuerbis (2004); and Edwards (2008: ix).

<sup>18</sup> This research was approved by the State University of New York-New Paltz Institutional Review Board.

<sup>19</sup> We note that all questions regarding participation in social fora were limited to respondents who said they were familiar with the WSF. This means that levels of participation in the 2007 USSF and 2008 Day of Action are likely conservative, since some CSOs may have participated in these events without knowing about the WSF.

<sup>20</sup> For discussion of the WSF's critique of 'singular thought' doctrine, see Schönleitner (2003: 128). Also see Fisher and Ponniah (2004: 10).

<sup>21</sup> While beyond the purview of our study, it is worth noting the possible importance of place within the forum process (Conway 2008). In other words, it may be that the 2008 WSF would have attracted greater participation by U.S. CSOs had it taken place in one physical location (rather than 'polycentrically' using an online format).

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