
This study uses a mixed methods approach to evaluate the information sharing behavior of Transition Initiatives, place-based organizations that work to improve the environmental sustainability of their local communities. Research questions center on the presence or absence of non-hierarchical methods of online communication and sharing. The study also looked for evidence of “resilient” and “diverse” practices in knowledge sharing through and beyond organization websites.

A content analysis of thirty web sites and four supplementary interviews with Transition Initiative organizers suggest that these organizations share information in a wide variety of ways both on and off the web. While the use of particular website platform types by individual groups appeared to have had some impact on how information was shared and how many participants authored content, observed social effects on information sharing were more numerous than structural ones.

Headings:

Information sharing

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Environment

Transition Town Movement
BUILDING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE ON AND OFF THE WEB: INFORMATION SHARING AND THE TRANSITION TOWN MOVEMENT

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Introduction

The Transition Town Movement is committed to getting things done. Sprung from a desire to meet the dual challenge of the climate change crisis and peak oil issues, individual Transition Initiatives (TIs) create local projects that increase the resilience of their communities. Among these undertakings are community gardens, local health care directories, workshop series, and local currency projects. Although its roots are firmly planted in environmental politics and permaculture principles, the Transition Town (TT) Movement is neither a “social movement organization” in the traditional sense, nor a fully formed philosophical model. It is one of a host of contemporary organizations using both in-person and techno-mediated communication to create place-based changes that envision “around” a host of environmental and economic problems facing contemporary societies.

According to Michael Buckland, “information-as-process is situational,” which is to say that information is determined to be information by contextual factors such as “pertinence,” “probability,” and “importance” (1991, p. 356-357). In the case of Transition Initiatives, one might also suggest that certain values play a role in what is considered “information,” or perhaps even “knowledge.” While the global TT Movement does have lead organizers, it is the information sharing of individuals in place-based TIs that create real change in communities. There is high value placed on participation and diversity of approach among these groups, which can be observed in TI website discussion boards and community-based projects alike.
This study looks at how Transition Initiatives share information, particularly through the websites they create. It seeks to explore the following trio of questions related to the structure, philosophy, and geographical nature of information sharing by TIs:

(RQ1) How do Transition Initiatives make use of horizontal or non-hierarchical modes of information sharing and knowledge creation? Is there evidence of these practices in the digital spaces they create?

(RQ2) What role does “diversity” play in creating resilient “spaces” for knowledge both online and in the physical world?

(RQ3) How are “local” and “global” defined in theory and practice of Transition Initiative projects?

The first and third questions employ language and theoretical concepts drawn from interdisciplinary research about the organizing and communication behaviors of social movement organizations. The second question draws on the language of the Transition Town Movement itself to explore how a values-based investment in diversity and resilience might manifest in the information sharing performed by TIs. To better contextualize these inquiries, the following section will situate this use of language and concepts within the larger theoretical premise that systems (including information systems) are complex and reveal emergent social behavior. A subsequent section of the introduction will provide a brief overview of the study and address its purpose and limitations.

Emergence and Complex Systems Theory

The first research question in this study asks whether or not there is evidence of non-hierarchical or horizontal modes of knowledge sharing in the digital spaces (e.g. websites) created by TIs. For the purpose of this study, “non-hierarchical sharing” is defined as sharing in which there are few or no layers of authority between information
creators and the ability to access and employ appropriate tools for disseminating
information to the rest of the group or community at large. Horizontality refers to
organizing methods that allow all participants to take active and engaged roles in agenda
setting and decision-making in social movement work. Occupy Wall Street is one
eexample of a group (or groups) that have recently practiced horizontal organizing
(Feldman, 2011).

Both of these concepts can be linked ontologically to notions of emergence and
complex systems theory. These models were first developed in the sciences, and have
recently been applied to phenomena like the Internet and global movements for change
like the alter-globalization movement. Johnson (2001) defines a complex system as one
“with multiple agents dynamically interacting in multiple ways, following local rules and
oblivious to any higher-level instructions” (p.19). Emergence might be defined as
“macrobahaviors” that results from a complex system at work. These theories suggest a
view of the world that privileges the collective action of individuals who move toward
new ways of being under their own power, rather than at the suggestion of a leader or
authority figure. In the field of biology this emergent behavior has been observed in
slime molds, which coalesce from single-cell existence into a mass when the
environmental conditions are optimal for cooperation (Johnson, 2001). No leader directs
this behavior; every cell makes its determination independently, though that
determination ultimately leads to highly collective action.

The alter-globalization movement, which proposes alternatives to corporate
modes of globalization centered on markets, “commodities,” and an economic bottom
line, has often organized in ways that could be defined as both emergent and non-
hierarchical. Individual groups with specific struggles for liberation from corporate imposition have created place-based movements that feed into a larger, “global” conversation in which no single narrative dominates yet there is great resonance and complimentary calls for a better world. Many of these groups are involved not only in mounting opposition to oppressive economic models, but also envisioning new ways of being that might replace them. With as many different approaches as there are locales, these groups act to “dissolve power” rather than seizing it, as advocated by Holloway (2010) among others. In *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism*, the authors frame this emerging form of resistance and re-visioning in mathematical terms, echoing back to the scientific expressions of complex systems theory:

“A dynamic geometry of social struggle is emerging, fractal-like, where local autonomy is repeated and magnified within networks that overflow geographic, cultural, and political borders.” (Notes from Nowhere [organization], p. 111)

While the central leadership of the TT Movement has created texts and procedures for local TIs in a manner its critics have found to be somewhat hierarchical, there is an emergent and fractal quality to the growth of TIs. They arise of their own accord as grassroots organizations, developing a uniquely local set of concerns, objectives, and projects. If one were to take a wide view of TI accomplishments, they would appear as clusters of distinct local achievements within a larger framework of ecological transition. Whether this translates into high levels of local participation and horizontality in the digital spaces TIs create is central question to be explored through the present study.

Emergence and complex systems play a role not only in social organization more broadly, but also in the structure of information networks, including the Internet. In her 2004 book, *Network Cultures: Politics for the Information Age*, Terranova has provided a
theoretical framework for understanding information in its contemporary forms, not as “media message[s]” that move in a linear fashion from “sender to receiver” but as a “meshwork of overlapping cultural formations” (p. 1). These information meshworks encompass local to global spaces, as well as the complex virtual “space” of the web, which reflects not only a collapsed geography and temporality, but also an unprecedented dynamism of movement.

Working to unravel Claude Shannon’s assumptions, which define information through measures of communication and materiality, Terranova has explored how information may be conceived not only as a “thing” which may be copied, shared, or disseminated in a controlled way, but as a force inseparable from the “information milieu” in which it exists. Created within a given topology, its “massless flow” in turn affects the typology itself, shaping the “network of networks” that makes up the Internet (p.41-42).

Terranova has not argued that the Internet provides a utopian space for equal and democratic participation, but rather, that it presents myriad and distributed spaces and micro-assertions of power that shape an ever-changing information landscape. She has emphasized the power of “passion” over rationality in the greater “information milieu.” It is in embracing this notion of a “distributed movement” driven more by shared emotion than forging a “common position,” that activists may have powerful influence in their use of information and communication technologies (p. 156). This view is highly consistent with the distributed and varied web presence of transition related organization, including the Transition Town Movement. In researching the use of websites to create and share
information, this study accepts the premise that information cannot be easily separated from the social and technological environment in which it was forged.

**Research Approach**

This study includes a content analysis of websites produced by individual Transition Initiatives, which allows for examination of the use of particular website features both in relation to the research questions, and to a similar study of United States social movement organizations performed by Stein (2009). The content analysis has been augmented by a small number of interviews intended to reveal more of the “real world” information sharing practices of TI participants, as well as needed background on how TIs have organized and negotiated their online information sharing.

The literature review explores several discrete bodies of scholarship that situate this inquiry at a juncture between information science, communication studies, and the interdisciplinary study of social movement organizations. While it may not be immediately clear that this study ought to be situated under the auspices of information science, its purpose is to look both at and beyond Transition Initiatives to glean a greater understanding of how information is shared in grassroots organizations, particularly those oriented toward high levels of “on the ground” action. Lessons learned from these kinds of organizations might have implications for other place-based organizations that deal with information, including public libraries. Certainly, there have been proposals made to re-envision the role of public libraries in ways consistent with participatory and non-hierarchical knowledge creation. Chowdhury, Poulter & McMenemy (2006) have suggested public libraries might transform their purpose from providing a consumer “product,” to creating a space for the interactive collection and dissemination of local
knowledge. Within this new framework, libraries would serve as “hubs” for knowledge shared by community members and unique to their geographic locales.

There are several significant limitations to this study. Content analysis could provide only a narrow and particular view of website use, one that cannot be easily extrapolated to answer more in-depth questions about information sharing practices. While interviews assisted in the development of a more complex and qualitative view, time constraints resulted in a very small, purposive sample. Given these issues in the study design, the research presented here may be understood as preliminary and exploratory in nature.
Literature Review

The following literature review, which is far from comprehensive, presents an effort to explore several discrete areas of scholarship relevant to the study of information sharing among TIs. The first section situates the Transition Town Movement within a larger ecological crisis and contrasts the response from more traditional environmental activist organizations with place-based and action-oriented groups like TIs. The next three sections present a short overview of the philosophy, history, and structure of the TT Movement, after which I discuss the critiques and responses to this distinctive organizing approach. The final three sections explore the theoretical issues and research trends in the study of how communities and organizations engage with information and communication technologies (ICT). The literature presented here crosses several disciplines including information science, communications studies, and sociology.

The Ecological Crisis and Discourses of Transition

In 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a dire report on the current and projected effects of warming on the planet. According to the combined research of three scientific working groups, the temperature of the earth will likely continue to rise a minimum of 1.8 degrees Celsius, possibly several degrees more, depending on international reduction of carbon emissions in the coming decades (IPCC, 2007). If the temperature increases between 1.5 and 2.5 degrees Celsius, the panel
projects 20-30% extinction rates, unabated natural disasters, food shortages, and increased illness and mortality among human populations (2007, p.13-14).

Climate change is only one of several environmental crises facing current and future generations, among them water, air, and ground pollution from two centuries of industrial capitalism. According to a report from the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, mercury levels in the atmosphere have increased between 200 and 400 percent since the middle of the 19th century, primarily due to the burning of coal (no date, p. 2). Threats of environmental contamination from nuclear power and weaponry are another concern, with the nuclear power industry generating over 2,000 metric tons of spent fuel every year that must be stored and contained (Nuclear Energy Institute, 2012).

In the United States, the modern environmental movement has been working for over sixty years to address these and other concerns through policy change. In 1962, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, which revealed the dangerous effects of agricultural and industrial pollutants on water quality and inspired a tremendous growth in research and action around the environment. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was founded in 1970 and charged not only with setting regulatory standards for pollution, but enforcing them (“EPA History,” n.d.). Greenpeace was founded in 1971, initially to monitor and raise awareness about nuclear testing in the world’s oceans, a mission they have expanded to include lobbying and advocacy work around a variety of climate and pollution-related issues (“Our History,” n.d.). Earth First! and Earth Liberation Front, both of which were formed in the late 1970s, have taken a more radical direct action approach, employing civil disobedience and litigation among other tactics.
In her book, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Val Plumwood has explained how the environmental problems the planet is currently facing are rooted in a deep philosophical schism between societies, especially capitalist societies, and the natural world. Powerfully linked to western dualisms and narrow definitions of “rationality,” the illusion of separateness and power over natural processes has caused humans to pursue a barrage of “techno-fix” solutions to environmental pollution, as opposed to abating the pollution itself. As Plumwood explains,

> The ecological crisis can be thought of as involving a centric and self-enclosed form of reason that simultaneously relies on and disavows its material base, as ‘externality’, and a similar failure of the rationalized world it has made to acknowledge and to adapt itself adequately to its larger ‘body’, the material and ecological support base it draws on in the long-denied counter-sphere or ‘nature’.” (p.4)

There is an important distinction to be made between modern environmental activism and groups engaged with what anthropologist Arturo Escobar has called *contemporary discourses of transition* (2011). Contemporary transition-oriented groups attempt transformation of the very crisis of reason that Plumwood describes, aiming to adapt even social and cultural practices to be more reciprocally engaged with the natural world. In contrast, environmental campaigns within the traditional social movement framework, such as Greenpeace, have largely embraced “sustainable development” and “green technologies,” which could be characterized as attempts to lessen damage to natural systems without thinking outside of the modern ontological structures that underlie industrial capitalism. Contemporary transition discourses, which are as diverse as the places from which they arise, often envision another world entirely, one which privileges relationality and notions of independent co-arising, (Escobar, 2011) a concept elaborated in complex systems theory.
According to Escobar, the ultimate value underlying contemporary discourses of transition is some sense of “living well,” a premise with ecological, cultural, and even spiritual significance (Escobar, 2011, p. 138). Although diverse groups around the world are pursuing some version of this project, there is no claim to universality of approach; rather the strength in contemporary transition discourses is that they represent not a single universe of ideas, but a place-based “pluriverse” of embodied knowledge. Escobar quotes a Zapatista definition of a pluriverse as, ‘a world where many worlds fit,’ one in which no way of living in community and with the land lays claim to superiority over others (p. 139). Unlike traditional social movements, contemporary transition discourses tend to imagine “around,” rather than actively targeting, the ontological and political structures for which they provide alternatives. They present a more embodied form of knowledge, one that flourishes by creating new ways of being that meet the social, environmental and cultural needs of the communities that have created them.

In her 1998 book *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect our Lives, our World*, eco-philosopher Joanna Macy has described this shift in approach from one characterized by “power-over” to “power with,” or a living systems theory model. In a “power over” worldview, all the elements that make up life on earth are compartmentalized and discrete, “resources” to be commanded and employed for the benefit of those who use their energy to do so (p. 52). In contrast, the “power with” approach favors diversity, resilience, and open systems over the competitive or discrete (p. 52-53).

While it would be difficult to argue that all Transition Initiatives embody the open and non-hierarchical modes of operating suggested by Macy, or the relationality and
place-based tactics observed by Escobar, these principles are certainly woven into many of the structures, projects, and philosophies of individual TIs and even the larger movement itself. By engaging with the place from which they arose - its unique landscape, community, and economic, social, and religious variables - many TIs find ways of acting locally to increase the quality of life for members of their communities. They do so not by following a strict set of instructions (although they do employ a transnationally shared set of “ingredients” in their organizing, which has drawn certain criticisms). Rather, they engage with their communities in a dynamic way, by asking what life might look (and smell and taste) like in their community should that community manage a transition to a more environmentally sustainable and resilient way of life (“Visioning,” n.d.).

**Transition Towns**

The Transition Town Movement seeks to address the two-pronged ecological crisis of peak oil and climate change with practical local solutions to living without reliance on cheap oil. Citing a number of industry production studies, founder and author Rob Hopkins argues that the recent increase in difficult and unsafe extraction methods such as tar sands refinement, coupled with a decline in the discovery of new deposits suggests that the era in which oil can be obtained cheaply and in abundance is nearly over. (2008, p. 22-25). While it’s unclear exactly when production might peak, or whether that moment has already passed, he presents a strong case for communities to begin a transition away from oil dependence right away. In discussing the IPCC findings about temperature increase and several studies of arctic sea ice loss, he points to the urgent need for drastic and immediate cuts to CO2 emissions, which have caused the
earth to warm. Citing the magnitude and urgency of both climate change and peak oil, Hopkins suggests that they are really “two aspects of the same problem,” both of which might be addressed by the re-localization of certain aspects of life, such as food production, energy generation, and medicine (p. 38).

The concept of “relocalization” is closely knit with notions of “resilience.” As defined by Walker & Slat (2006), resilience relates to the ability of a system (be it a natural system like ocean currents or a social system like a community) to adapt or effectively transform in response to change or shocks. In the third chapter of the Transition Handbook, a primer for Transition Initiatives, Hopkins breaks this principle down into three essential components: diversity, modularity, and the tightness of feedback loops.

Diversity refers to the presence of several kinds of variety. Diversity at a local community level might mean using a given space in a number of different ways, and it also might mean that the people who make up the community have a wide variety of skills and abilities. Privileging diversity between systems or communities suggests that there is no one right way to organize or to plan a life beyond cheap oil. Each location will come up with its own unique and diverse set of strategies.

Modularity is related to the nature of social and economic linkages; a more resilient community will have more links, and that those links will be to people or entities that are closer rather than farther away. For example, in a community with high modularity, members may be able to buy or barter for affordable meat from one of several neighbors rather than purchasing it at a grocery store where it’s sourced from a single factory farm located three states away.
Tightness of feedback loops refers to the speed with which a member of a given system or community receives evidence that a social or environmental practice is working or not working. In a system with tight feedback loops, members are less likely to allow a problem to persist because they are quickly made aware of how that problem affects their community. For example, if one were to rely on fish from a local lake, pollution of that lake affecting the health of fish populations would be quickly realized and likely corrected.

These elements that make up resilience - diversity, modularity, and the tightness of feedback loops - play a role not just in creating stronger communities, but also, perhaps, in strengthening how those communities create and share information. Each of these three components of resilient systems can be observed at several different “nested” levels within a larger social or community system. This kind of tiered interplay of scales, or “panarchy,” has been defined by Gunderson & Holling (2002) as a key structure of dynamic and cross-scale transformations in systems, which are constantly changing and adapting with one another, although they may do so at different levels and speeds. Information sharing may happen at various levels within a community and while it is largely beyond the scope of this study to do so, examining the interplay between one-to-one and community-wide sharing could provide a useful view of “panarchy” as a lived experience.

As Walker & Slat (2006) have explained, it is the ability of a community to retain “memory” at various levels - including high levels - of functioning that will allow it to recover after a shock. In thinking about how information and knowledge is shared, this may suggest that knowledge shared on participatory forums on a website is also shared
face to face in workshops, printed on paper, or made into a video. While evaluating community resilience in the face of documented “shocks” to a community is beyond the scope of this study, the research does point to related questions about reaching a broad and diverse audience through multiple methods of communication.

**History**

Transition Town Movement founder Rob Hopkins, who has a background in teaching permaculture and natural building techniques, began thinking about how to use permaculture principles to create a plan for moving away from oil reliance while teaching in Kinsale, Ireland in the early 2000s. When he moved to Totnes, England around 2005 he began to collaborate with Naresh Giangrande to create what would become the first “official” transition town, Transition Town Totnes (Hopkins, no date). In 2008, he published *the Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*, which served both as rational for and primer to those looking to start their own local initiatives. Since then, there have been several other guidebooks published about creating TIs, among them Shaun Chamberlain’s *Transition timeline* (2009), and Hodgson’s *Transition in action* (2010), which is a published version of the Energy Descent Action Plan (EDAP) developed by Transition Town Totnes. Along with Pete Lipman and Ben Brangwyn, Hopkins founded the Transition Network, an organization created “to inspire, encourage, connect, support and train communities as they adopt and adapt the transition model on their journey to urgently rebuild resilience and drastically reduce CO2 emissions” (About,” n. d.). Creating a single web hub for a range of resources, both informative (articles, videos), and dynamic (maps and contact information for new and established TIs), the network serves as a global community space for these very place-
based organizations. They also provide continually updated versions of *The Transition Primer*, a foundational text for organizing TIs that has been maintained as a digital-only document. Transition United States, a hub created in partnership with Transition Network, uses a similar structure to provide information and spaces for American initiatives to be put “on the map” so others might find and join them. While Transition United States only includes TIs in the U.S., the Transition Network connects initiatives worldwide.

**Structure**

The Transition Town Network describes the process of creating a TI as one of mixing a variety of “ingredients” in an order loosely organized around four phases: “Starting out, Deepening, Connecting, Building, and Daring to dream” (“Ingredients,” n. d.). For each phase, they have provided links to information about developmental qualities of the phase and activities that might be useful, such as creating a transition timeline and inviting community members to fill it in with potential projects, or inviting the community to engage in ‘backcasting’ exercises, in which participants creatively vision changes as if they had already happened (“Ingredients,” n. d.). They recommend that groups pick and choose elements from each phase that work best for them, but maintain the strict order of progression through the phases. All fully established TIs are charged with creating an Energy Descent Action Plan (EDAP), which is a document that encompasses objectives, vision, and planning. In earlier print and web-based versions of these guidelines, the steps toward forming an initiative were much more strictly laid out and titled “the twelve steps” as opposed to “ingredients.” The elements, which remained
unchanged regardless of title, have been reproduced here in full as they speak strongly to the character and nature of the endeavor:

Twelve Steps [“Ingredients” on the Transition Network website]
1. Set up a steering group and design its demise from the outset
2. Raise awareness
3. Lay the foundations
4. Organize a great unleashing
5. Form groups
6. Use Open Space
7. Develop visible practical manifestations of the project
8. Facilitate the great reskilling
9. Build a bridge to local government
10. Honour the elders
11. Let it go where it wants to go

Some of the “ingredients” are relatively simple and transparent, while others use language specific to the transition concept. Number four, “organize a great unleashing” refers to creating an inspiring night of speakers and engaged activities for the community to learn about and discuss the transition concept. It is intended to set the stage for the initiation of the working groups and “practical manifestations of the project” that come after. Number six, “use Open Space,” refers to employing Open Space Technology to organize a larger meeting of community members. With this technique, there is no preset agenda; participants set the agenda and nearly every other aspect of the event. The guidelines for Open Space events are as follows: “Whoever comes are the right people, whatever happens is the only thing that could have, whenever it starts is the right time, when it’s over, it’s over” (Hopkins, 2008, p.168).

Number eight, “facilitate the great reskilling” involves coordinating local community members to teach a variety of community self-sufficiency workshops which might include raising livestock, making cheese, canning, house winterization, knitting, or
growing medicinal herbs. The final two steps present an interesting tension in TI organizing between rules and order and non-hierarchical processes. “Let it go where it wants to go” is a nod to the localized nature of the endeavor. Each initiative will focus its undertakings in a unique way, based on the people involved as well as the culture, geography, and economy of the place in which they are operating. In contrast, the final step refers to the creation of a structured Energy Descent Action Plan, which serves to capture the vision of the TI and chart a course for future action. Hopkins hopes that all initiatives can create some sort of concrete plan that will allow them to move away from reliance on cheap oil over the next twenty years. The Transition Town Totnes EDAP, published as *Transition in Action*, is a visually appealing overview of the communities current needs, transitions underway, and projected goals as applied to a variety of areas such as “food production” “health and wellbeing” and “building and housing” (Hodgson, 2010, “table of contents”).

To become an “official” Transition Initiative, a group must first form to discuss the concepts and related readings. The Transition Network, which is based out of the UK, asks that groups in this phase contact them so they can be marked on the Network’s website as a newly formed group in the “mulling” stage. This information is posted on the global directory so other potential members may search online and find a nearby group that’s just forming (or an “official” group; these are listed as well).

The next phase, becoming “official” requires the fulfillment of sixteen criteria, which are submitted to the Transition Network through a downloadable application form. The criteria range from creating specific structural elements to formalizing commitment to certain values and principles. Logistical requirements include having a core team of at
least 4-5 people, maintaining a current website, and pursuing organizer training in transition and permaculture. More value-driven criteria include a commitment to seek help from other initiatives or the Transition Network when needed, to establish “minimal conflicts of interests in the core team,” and to promise to network and collaborate with other initiatives (Slayton, n.d.). While individual TIs maintain control over their own funds, if any, the Transition Network requests assistance (e.g. numbers, data) in seeking grant funding for the organization as a whole.

**Critiques and Responses**

The Transition Town Movement is not without detractors. The most commonly articulated criticisms are that the meta-organization and framework are largely apolitical, and that while claiming to be grassroots, the movement forwards some very hierarchical organizing principles. Connors & McDonald (2011) and Chatterton & Cutler of the Trapese Collective (2008) both offer cogent criticisms of the model and the movement. In the activist circles and web-based dialogues that these arguments have been channeled through, organizers and members of the TT Movement have both incorporated and challenged these critiques. In 2012, an updated version of Hopkins’ *Transition Town Handbook* was published - *The Transition Companion*. In order to illustrate how critiques have been framed and addressed, the following paragraphs present arguments as presented by Connors & McDonald and Chatterton & Cutler, and related materials or responses Rob Hopkins’ blog, Transition Culture, and *The Transition Companion*.

The first concern raised by Connors & McDonald is that TIs have at times co-opted existing movements, organizations, or projects, usurping the history of those unique endeavors to incorporate them into the transition town framework (2011, p. 564).
They found evidence of this when speaking with people in Totnes, the very first TI, and wondered why it occurred when the organization’s own philosophy emphasizes building good relationships with similarly aligned groups and local government. The course of this study revealed that TIs are often highly successful at publicizing events and projects, whether planned by their organization or another. In interviews, organizers from one TI, Transition Putney, articulated this as a strength of their TI’s approach, and did not suggest any conflict in serving their community in this capacity.

The question posed by Connors & McDonald relates to situations in which a project had been well underway before the TI became involved. If an undertaking like a community garden had history, a mission, and devoted members before a TI joined, but it was the TI that photographed it, shared articles, publicized events, and recruited its founders as participants, to what degree have they overstepped the framework of the original project? In a 2009 blog post addressing a separate concern, that the TT Movement does not provide enough structure, Hopkins’ explains that he does see the TT Movement in this coordinating, information-sharing role:

“We see Transition as a catalyst, something people start and then projects and initiatives emerge. We are keen to not be prescriptive, and as a result, Transition looks different in all the places it starts. We see our role as being more to gather the successes and failures of projects and to link to people already doing things so that wheels aren’t reinvented. (“Responding to Ted Trainer…” para. 11) In a way, the TT Movement may act as a bridge between and toward new forms of community development and re-localization. Yet how TIs impact existent organizations can be a thorny issue. It may be that what is lost for the stakeholders in the original project - often a highly politicized mission - is of lesser value to the TT Movement and therefore mutable.
The second major critique, that the TT Movement is so inclusive it’s apolitical, gets to the heart of the matter. For organizations that have been doing environmental work for a decade or more before the TT Movement came into being, there may be real concerns that the political foundations of that work would be suppressed in the course of collaboration. Hopkins has proposed that the TT Movement can get the most practical “on the ground” transition work done by focusing on the work itself rather than on possible structural problems that these solutions envision “around” or “beyond.” At times, this argument has been presented as a matter of politics and numbers. In a 2008 blog post responding the Trapese Collective’s critique of the Transition framework, Hopkins states “I make no apologies for the Transition approach being designed to appeal as much to the Rotary Club and the Women’s Institute as to the authors of this report [the Trapese Collective].” (“Rocky road to a real transition: a review,” para. 6) It seems that in working to make transition a common and widely accepted concept, Hopkins has chosen to address it separately from the strongly held principles of other alter-globalization or re-localization groups. Many of these groups, which may also place transition high among their priorities, argue that addressing advanced capitalism and the politics of power in environmental policy are integral to successful transition work.

For Hopkins, couching transition goals within a larger leftist political platform is not worth the loss of numbers. He would like to see transition embraced across a wide spectrum of political beliefs, not because it is stands as a critique of the status quo, but because it is very simply good for the health of communities. While at times Hopkins stresses this issue of inclusion, he has also expressed a more straightforward desire to
“get things done” sooner rather than later, even if it means setting politics to the side. As he explains in a 2008 blog post:

If we hamstring ourselves to the extent that we don’t believe we can do anything effective until capitalism has met its demise first at the hand of a revolution, then we give away such a great deal of power that we become, in effect, marginalized and useless. (“Responding to various critiques,” para. 18)

It may be that the TT Movement situates itself less as a position and more as an experiment, a notion born out in the “cheerful disclaimer” that prefaces the 2012 *Transition Companion*, and appears on many individual TI websites. A succinct confession, it lays claim to a desire to act in spite of myriad unknowns:

“Transition is not a known quantity. We truly don’t know if transition will work. It is a social experiment on a massive scale. What we are convinced of is this:

- If we wait for the governments, it’ll be too little, too late.
- If we act as individuals, it’ll be too little.
- But if we act as communities, it might be just enough, just in time…” (p. 17, *formatting in original*)

The final critique to be addressed here may have the most direct impact on this study. Connors & McDonald (2011) have suggested that while the TT Movement lays claim to a self-organizing structure, it is in fact more hierarchical in nature. One of the three major research questions to be addressed here is whether or not a non-hierarchical organizing structure bears out in the ways individual TIs have created and shared their information. It’s certainly a complex task to parse out the forces at work in what is arguably a global but local movement. As Connors & McDonald have pointed out, the TT Movement *does* have a spokesperson-founder, as well as powerfully structuring visioning documents, or, as they refer to the *Transition Primer* “a prescriptive manifesto” (2011, p. 567). They also note the presence of distinct hurdles facing groups who want to be listed as “official,” criteria which have a great deal to do with the image of the Transition Network as an organization, including its ability to obtain funding. Despite
this, it’s worth noting that most of the works produced by Rob Hopkins and the Transition Network have invited feedback at every step of the way from transition initiatives around the world. As Hopkins explains about the *Transition Companion*:

> “each of the ‘tools’ and ‘ingredients’ was written in draft and posted to my blog, transitionculture.org, as well as on the Transition Network’s site. Comments and feedback were invited. Transition initiatives from around the world were invited to send in their stories and photos, which abound in this book….Even the title was thought up by Martin Tepper when I put a post on Transition Culture asking for ideas as to what this book should be called” (2008, p. 15)

It’s difficult to know how initiatives are impacted by what are certainly elements of hierarchy or top-down structure. From much of what’s written by supporters of the TT Movement, it seems that the suggestions culled from around the world, reformulated and presented back through the Transition Network are appreciated more than anything else. How this “global” hierarchy compares with local information sharing will be addressed in the discussion section of this study.

**Communities and Knowledge Organization: Digital and Place-Based**

To properly situate this study on the Transition Town Movement and its information sharing practices, it’s necessary to touch on several discrete sets of literature that address community, technology use, and social change. Literature on social capital and communitarianism provide frameworks for understanding the social and organizational variables that apply to transition initiatives as community-based groups with a particular theoretical outlook. Literature from information science and communication studies addresses more directly the interplay between individual ICT use and civic engagement or knowledge sharing. Finally, communication studies scholars who write about social movement organizations (SMOs) can provide examples of how ICT can be used to create change. Although there is a critical difference in the level of
political engagement between SMOs, which are engaged in activist work, and transition initiatives, which tend to be more apolitical, both groups organize to create change and therefore share *some* overlapping behaviors when it comes to their information sharing behaviors.

**Community and Theory**

In *Conceptualizing Community: Beyond the State and Individual*, sociologist David Studdert addresses current debates about community and describes a variety of models for understanding how communities conceptualize their functioning, including communitarianism. Communitarianism emphasizes the importance of the social and moral aspects of geographic community, including reciprocity and the development of shared community values. Social capital, a catch phrase used in discussions of community across disciplines, often with allusion to Robert Putnam’s designation, is defined by Studdert as that which “encompasses norms, relationships, expectations, that bind people together within all forms of communities and as such… is predominantly concerned with what creates stable communities and enhances their co-operative capacity, particularly in an economic sense.” (2005, p. 34) This definition, which takes into account both the social and material health of communities, gets at the heart of communitarianism and the transition concept, and indeed the creation of social capital has been a frequently touted benefit to the movement, both by members and in literature produced by the Transition Network.

Communitarianism as described by Studdert might also be part of a theoretical portrait of transition, as it is focused on creating forms of action and “social democracy” outside of or beyond the reach of government. The communitarian approach invests
heavily in the success of co-operation and trust among self-organized groups, which aim to propose new solutions to problems that governments have failed to address, rather than fighting for change in government policy (p. 49). The TT Movement has embraced the idea that waiting for government change will result in “too little, too late” and instead created organizations focused on facilitating on-the-ground change from the grassroots.

In her detailed overview of the theoretical models bearing on relationships between information and democracy, Brenda Dervin offers further insight into why communitarianism aptly describes transition organizing. According to her analysis, it presents a conceptual move from the examination of “entities and states” to “processes and dynamics.” It is an “and/with” model that does not rule out essentialist ground, but also fully embraces “ontological as well as epistemological incompleteness.” (1994, p. 86) It looks at how order is made and unmade in dynamic processes. Finally, it allows for the use of utopias to theorize “toward” new ways of being while remaining incomplete and without essential outcomes. Even a cursory review of TT Movement activities can bring this into focus. The movement’s official steps or “ingredients” embrace the notion of creating real change while acknowledging the imperfection and experimental nature of the project – it’s epistemically incomplete. The focus on “visioning” and “backcasting” in which communities describe possible transformations as if they had already occurred illustrate the power of utopias as a useful tool for communitarian projects.

Perhaps most significant to this study and its examination of diversity in information sharing is Dervin’s observation that while diversity is considered to be a weakness that must be dealt with or controlled in the majority of modern information systems, communitarian and postmodern approaches find strength in diversity, calling for
different kinds of information systems altogether (1994, p. 382). To take steps in this direction would require acknowledging that epistemologies and ontologies will never be complete, and that human relationships with information go beyond fact-finding and other truth-centered approaches. Users must be incorporated from the start, not catered to as an afterthought in an already constituted system of order. Responsiveness is a key concept here, one closely linked with the “feedback loops.” The content analysis portion of this study attempts to measure the degree of participatory sharing online, a mode of communication that allows for a greater diversity of ideas in the creation of organizational “knowledge.”

Communities, Engagements, and ICT

There has been a great deal of debate among social scientists and activists alike about whether or not it’s possible to create a real community online. In her historiography of community theory, Kayahara argues that the conceptual divide between neighborhood and online communities can be grounded in fundamentally different definitions of “community,” a term with great diversity of historical meaning and use. She provides an overview of several schools of thought around community, beginning with Ferdinand Tönnies, who argued that Gemeinschaft (community) in a nonurban environment is defined by “intimacy, sympathy, trust, and common values,” and can be aligned around blood (kinship, memory), locality (place-based), and the mind (similarity, intellectual views) (2006, p. 129). Tönnies developed a separate framework for modern urban environments and argued that they were driven not by “natural will” but by “rationality.”

Communitarians brought conversations about community back to more pre-
modern and non-urban discourses on morality, suggesting that to uphold moral standards, there must be strong neighborhood communities. These communities could re-conceptualize ideas about the family – there was no argument that one need adhere to tradition – but the community must have a set of shared values and a dense mesh of connections between members, not simply one-to-one interaction. Putnam (2000) built on this “mesh of connections” with his ideas about reciprocity and community social capital. His analysis has been criticized for lacking a cultural dimension, for overemphasizing trust, and also for scaling a one-to-one concept up to a community level. Social constructionists have taken a looser view, emphasizing the examination of boundaries as a means to understand how a community defines itself.

Contemporary scholars have argued that certain elements of community are possible online such as support, sense of belonging, sociability, and access to information but not certain other elements such as group gatherings, ritual, and institutions (Kayahara, 2006). Some have suggested that there is an irreplaceable relationality inherent in geographic community. Several studies have suggested that support may be a key community element that can be offered online, whether in the form of emotional support, information, or even the beginnings of a geographic relationship. Criticism of online communities has focused on the narrowness of connections, selective participation, anonymity, and lack of accountability. For each issue there is a counterpoint. For example, while it’s easy to drop out of an online community due to conflict, it may also be easier to stay and resolve it than it would be in a face-to-face community. (Kayahara, 2006, p. 145)
In summarizing the differences between those who highlight the efficacy of online communities over neighborhood communities, Kayahara has explained that online communities are touted for their benefit to individual users, who are able to go online, find like-minded people, get support and information, and leave when their needs have been met. In contrast, those who criticize online communities often do so in the name of the collective, arguing that it is only in-person community that can help people learn to co-operate and move beyond their own needs for the good of the whole (2006, p. 144). Further critiques center on the inequality of access to online communities, which are quickly becoming a retreat for those with economic privilege. Kayahara has discussed contemporary arguments about how the “virtual community” model might repackage consumption-oriented Internet use - previously explained in libertarian or free market terms - in a way that suits a middle-class liberal user-base and its notions of “community” (p. 153).

To analyze the impact of ICT on communities, or communities on ICT, it’s critical to recognize the inherent complexity of use, disuse, and adaptations. Evans (2004) has referred to this as the ‘messy’ and bi-directional utility of ICT. The hegemonic narrative propagated by neoliberal culture and economy is that ICT is a ‘universal good’ that improves every corner of social life it touches (2004, p. 26). This presumption must be thoroughly interrogated to develop any useful set of understandings about how a community interacts with ICT and what ICT truly means to their organization within its unique social, cultural, and environmental context. In Mobilities, Networks, Geographies, Larson, Urry, & Axhausen (2006) have added a spatial dimension to this “untidy reality,” pointing to the manner in which modern “social networks involve
diverse connections, which are more or less at a distance, more or less intense and more or less mobile” (p. 19). There is a dynamic interplay between the interactions pursued “face-to-face” and the ability to move oneself or one’s communication across geographic distance. In examining Transition Initiatives, these “messy” engagements with ICT and mobilities must be kept firmly in mind. ICT is used both to cut distance and time, by individuals whose lives have been shaped by ICT is positive and negative ways, both directly and in engagements with a shifting lived environment.

Evans has argued that the credit ascribed to ICT for creating community is often exaggerated (2004, p. 61), a finding echoed by several others including Kavanaugh & Patterson, authors of a 2002 study on ICT use and community involvement in Blacksburg, Virginia. The Blacksburg study tested Putnam’s claims that Internet use increased civic engagement, revealing that the Internet could be more accurately characterized as a tool individuals and communities with high levels of engagement employ in their existent community building work. The study looked at Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV), a “bundled” internet package offered to residents starting in 1993. The organizers, who were predominately university affiliates, offered education and support to those interested in adopting the technology (Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2002, p. 331). Once most residents had access, organizers began to think about how the Internet could benefit local community need, not by shifting all communication to an online environment but by adding online materials and spaces to supplement face-to-face organizing. In a telephone survey conducted in 1996 and again in 1999, the researchers expected to find an increase in social capital through self-reported organizational involvement and expressed attachment to community. Instead, they found that while
more people adopted technology over time, only a small group of the population already civically active continued to be active and expand that activity to online environments (Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2002).

Katz & Rice have painted a slightly different picture of ICT and political involvement. In their 1995-2000 telephone surveys about ICT use and communication, they found that Internet use correlated with increased community involvement particularly with regard to political engagement (2002, p. 135). But while they suggested this might be a benefit of ICT, they have been cautious not to embrace a wholesale endorsement of technology as an inherently positive tool for creating community. Their findings were relatively limited in scope, and spoke particularly to involvement with electoral politics, which is a very small subset of community engagement.

While there have been a fair number of wholesale condemnations of ICT’s impact on community, the more useful critiques seek to address attendant variables that play a role in when and how ICT is useful for creating community. To begin with, it’s important to note how ICT has changed physical spaces in real and tangible ways. McCluskey (2006) has reflected on local knowledge and questions the underlying theoretical assumptions employed in arguments for “universal access” to the Internet and its resources. He has argued that in and of itself, “universal access” is a myth. By necessity the growth of Internet access has excluded those who chose not to use it or cannot use it, by causing changes to the social and economic landscape of communities. For example, even someone who does not shop on amazon.com will experience the impact of its growing user base as local bookstores are reduced in number (McCluskey, 2006, p. 101).

The problem he has described in this movement toward the digital is one of
balance. The Internet has allowed the “global” to usurp the local, a trend that seems to occur across many dimensions of corporate globalization. As part of this imbalance, tools (hardware) are emphasized over knowledge creation and preservation. Consuming is privileged over creating, a problem McCluskey links to an education system in which expert perspectives are privileged not just for the information they convey, but as sole proprietors of the tools needed to unpack knowledge or critically understand it (p.105).

He suggests that when people participate in spaces where they can act as creators of knowledge, they experience value and self-worth outside of the limiting role of worker-producer, an important aspect of building strong community (p. 105).

It is possible to use digital arenas as part of a project that brings knowledge back into balance, but a key element of this use is the recognition that “not all knowledge needs to be or should be written down” (McCluskey, 2006, p. 108). McCluskey has argued that a balanced approach will privilege dialog and an invitation for knowledge to be shared orally, not just in text on a screen. He has situated this in terms of local and global dimensions, suggesting that when the local community is vibrant and engaged, notions of “globalization” are less threatening to social capital and place-based knowledge sharing (p. 99).

In his analysis of the literature on community and ICT, Wilken (2011) has drawn attention to the relative absence of place and space in contemporary scholarship on these issues. He explained that whether scholars choose to discuss it or not, truly geographic notions of place will continue to impact the effects of ICT on community and vice versa:

“The persistence of place occurs on many levels and in a variety of contexts. These include: the recurrent reference to place and geography in text-based exchanges within virtual community; the place-associated design of many virtual community interfaces; the use of [computer mediated communication] in
community building projects; the ‘place’ of everyday computer-use, such as the office or domestic home; as well as the notion of ‘glocalization’ and the broader context of global-local interchange.” (p. 85)

Transition Initiatives, which are so heavily grounded in their originating communities, raise important questions about how local knowledge might be nurtured and supported as local or place-based knowing. This knowledge may be at its most useful when expressed face-to-face or, if online, dialogically and in ways that extend “real time” and place-based sharing into an asynchronous space.

Social Movement Organizations and ICT

The literature described thus far has dealt with the creation of community and how ICT might play a role in levels of civic engagement and knowledge sharing. However, among transition initiative work there is an “action” oriented element that requires further illumination. The literature on Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) and their use of ICT, while not a perfect fit, can facilitate a better understanding of how organizations interact with ICT in the course of working toward tangible objectives.

In a 2000 article on the virtual and “real” networks created by social movements, Diani examined computer-mediated communication (CMC) as observed among different types of SMOs and discussed how their efforts may be impacted by technology use. He argued that the spread of e-mail technology might contribute to an increase in communication links between individuals and the organizations they belong to, as well as growth in links across local, national, and transnational branches of coalitions. He highlighted the benefits of technologically mediates discussion groups as they seem to be “encouraging interaction and polyadic, rather than dyadic, communication dynamics.” (p. 388)
Citing the 1997 findings of Virnoche & Marx, Diani outlined a typology of virtual social systems, including community networks, in which members share close geography; virtual extensions, in which members share some geography but more significantly other association like work or voluntary membership in an organization; and virtual communities, which are built solely around ideas. Keeping these distinctions in mind, he outlined sub-types of SMOs that embody discrete objectives and related degrees of “virtuality.”

If one were to situate the TT Movement or individual Transition Initiatives within his framework, they might overlap with two very different designations. First, they might be compared with the SMOs he defined by their commitment to “mobilizing mainly participatory resources,” which tend to be grassroots, focused on “ideological and solidarity incentives to direct action” (p. 393). Diani argues that these groups are less likely to create ties virtually and more likely to reinforce the ties already in place through their use of CMC, a description that seems apt for describing the working of individual Transition Initiatives (p. 394). However, the TT Movement as a whole is better described as a “transnational organization,” a type of SMO that benefits tremendously from the ability of CMC to reach a dispersed membership across geographic distance. Diani has argued that e-mail technology has allowed transnational organizations to collaborate with members around the world, increasing the “density” of organizers by allowing them to operate in tandem in the same asynchronous communication space (p. 395).

Garrett (2006) forwards an even more comprehensive framework for discourse about how SMOs use ICT, examining trends in the literature and creating “structural” categories to describe the possible benefits and challenges movements face in their ICT
use. He explains that the three major benefits touted in literature about how activists use technology could be characterized as follows:

1. It can reduce the cost of participation.
2. It can promote “collective identity.”
3. It can assist in creating community. *(Numbering added, p. 204)*

Some have argued that when costs can be freed up by ICT, participation can increase as more communication is achieved with less funding (e.g. updating a website or sending out a mass e-mail rather than printing hundreds of flyers or pamphlets). The counterpoint to this argument is that members or recipients may become “overloaded” and unable to absorb information shared with increasing speed and quantity, an argument forwarded by Bimber *(2000)*. Others have argued that ICT fortifies possible participants by providing them a shared sense of common experience or collective identity, even across a broad geographical area. While this can motivate more individuals to act, the counterargument is that activists may become polarized, surrounding themselves only with those who share identical perspectives. This kind of environment, in which activists subdivide into increasingly narrow groups, can result in a brittle or fractured community. Finally, arguments in the literature about SMOs and their use of ICT echo those expressed by Kavanaugh & Patterson and others; while it’s difficult to identify cases in which ICT has truly “created” community, it could be argued that it is used as a tool to reinforce networks people have already made or to strengthen relationships in the space between face-to-face meetings.

Issues of cost and increased communication facilitated by ICT are of particular significance to this study, as “diversity” in information sharing is impacted by how redundant an organization can afford to be in their information dispersal. On this topic, Garrett has argued that although “overload” may be an issue as people receive
increasingly frequent updates from organizations they are affiliated with, “allowing an individual to access relevant information quickly and easily when she/he is most receptive to it may facilitate information absorption.” (2006, p. 207) In other words, the asynchronous nature of CMC might be its greatest benefit to organizing. Indeed, Transition Initiatives seem to benefit from discussion boards that allow dialog to unfold over hours or days to suit the needs of members, a topic that will receive greater attention in the discussion portion of this study.
Methodology

This study employs a mixed methods approach comprised of website content analysis and interviews. The goal in pursuing these two very different methods of data collection was to augment quantitative data with more explanatory or qualitative accounts. The scope of the content analysis was broad, with nearly one third of United States TIs examined. In contrast, the interviewing portion of the study was quite limited, with less than 10% of the sampled initiatives consulted. Though the interviews may have been limited in number, they were nonetheless invaluable to addressing some of the questions posed by the study. Interviews with members of purposively selected initiatives from within the content analysis sample provided perspective not only on how individual initiatives organize their information, but where the content analysis process might fall short in capturing knowledge organization and information sharing behavior.

Content Analysis

According to Neuendorf (2002), content analysis, which takes language and “message characteristics” as its subject, has become a tremendously useful quantitative and qualitative tool for examining the wealth of recorded information produced both in and beyond a mass media context (p. 9). While the method has been more traditionally applied to printed text and video/film production, she suggests that the web, thought it poses some challenges for the researcher with its “chaotic” and dynamic nature, could provide important new areas for content analysis research (p. 206-207).
Content analysis can be roughly divided into two sub-types: manifest content analysis and latent content analysis. Manifest content analysis is more strictly quantitative, and involves counting the occurrence of certain pre-determined elements (e.g. words, symbols, strings) within a given sampling unit, such as an article or book. In contrast, latent content analysis attempts to capture the presence or absence of pre-determined “constructs” which are usually conveyed in a variety of ways, not only through the presence or absence of a single term (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 23). Krippendorff (2004) explains that both manifest and latent content analysis can help researchers to identify “trends, patterns, and differences” within systems, from which larger extrapolations can be made (p. 49-51). This study primarily employs manifest content analysis (e.g. presence of an RSS feed) but certain criteria have qualitative dimensions (e.g. whether a given piece of writing be classified as a “how-to” article).

To produce both reliable and valid data using content analysis, there are a number of important issues the researcher must consider. Reliability, or the ability for a study to be replicated by other researchers to similar result, relies heavily on consistent and granular criteria of analysis. Having more than one “rater” or coder of texts introduces the possibility of inconsistency in the application of criteria (Krippendorff, p. 217). The “noise” introduced by this problem can be minimized by very clearly defining the terms for each criteria to allow for consistent application over time and across raters (Krippendorff, p. 217), an effort that was made in defining the more qualitative or latent elements in this study.

Establishing validity in content analysis involves careful attention to several nodes of study design. Creating exhaustive criteria to get at a single concept is an
important objective, as choosing too few elements may produce vague conclusions that cannot be extrapolated to deal with the issues the researcher intended to address. For example, this study intends to address the presence or absence of non-hierarchical organizing, and as such requires comprehensive inclusion of interactivity and organizational items, not just a selection of one or two related website features. Construct validity requires that the researcher not only address all aspects of a construct, such as “non-hierarchical organizing” but then be able to correlate their results with existing definitions of that concept (Krippendorff, p. 315).

**Study Design**

In her 2009 assessment of Internet use by social movement organizations (SMOs) in the United States, Stein created a helpful typology and content analysis instrument, which has been significantly altered and adopted to meet the needs of this study. Stein was interested in looking at how a movement website “provides information, assists action and mobilization, promotes interaction and dialog, makes lateral linkages, serves as an outlet for creative expression, and promotes fundraising and resource generation” (p. 5-6). Her original instrument, which charts the presence or absence of specific website features, such as an RSS feed, read-only listserv, or organization history section, has 63 parts organized among the 6 high-level categories quoted above.

During a preliminary study design period, the researcher experimented and altered Stein’s instrument. A preliminary survey of TI websites suggested that creative expression (e.g. poetry, art, music) was not a significant element of these sites, and so it has been omitted. Fundraising and resource generation is an element of some initiatives’ web presence, but does not relate directly to the research questions of this study and as
such has been excluded from analysis. While Stein’s remaining four categories provided a useful framework for developing criteria for this study, only 6 of her items have been adopted in their original form, and another 13 in adapted forms. The remaining 11 items are original to this project. This instrument was developed through a process of preliminary testing in order to weed out redundant elements and clarify collection practices so they best serve the study research questions. The final list of items, along with specific analysis criteria and the original source for each item are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Content Analysis Instrument

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Providing Information</th>
<th>Qualifying criteria</th>
<th>Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analysis item</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Video</td>
<td>Clips, original or re-posted, or streaming</td>
<td>Adapted from Stein: “Stream video reports”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Audio</td>
<td>Clips of streaming, links</td>
<td>Adapted from Stein: “Stream audio reports”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Local/Project Photos</td>
<td>Photos taken of local projects, either captioned or presented in conjunction with information about the project</td>
<td>Developed by the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSS feed</td>
<td>Sign-up link provided</td>
<td>Adapted from Stein: “RSS/frequent updates”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail list / Listserv</td>
<td>Sign-up method provided, read-only or participatory</td>
<td>Adapted from Stein: “Read-only listservs”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short news / updates by local members</td>
<td>250 words or less, not re-posted from another named site</td>
<td>Developed by the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative articles written by local members</td>
<td>251 words or more, not re-posted from another named site</td>
<td>Adapted from Stein: “Self-published articles/reports”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How-to articles written by local members</td>
<td>Articles that offer instruction on a particular skill, not re-posted from another named site</td>
<td>Developed by the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles by non-members shared</td>
<td>Articles re-posted from another named site</td>
<td>Adapted from Stein: “Alternative news articles” and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Further research suggestions / Bibliographies
- Three or more citations or titles
- Adapted from Stein: “Mainstream news articles”

### Leadership speeches and articles
- Notes from self-identified organizer or committee member or presence of an article expressing sentiments about future direction of the initiative (e.g. missions, goals, reasons)
- From Stein: “Leadership speeches and articles”

### Media/press releases
- Titled as such (also noted presence of flyers but did not code as “present” simply for flyer inclusion)
- From Stein: “Media/press releases”

### Reference to paper or pdf newsletter
- Adapted from Stein: “Newsletter”

### Reference to a physical collection of print, DVD resources
- Developed by the researcher

### Information about Organization space
- Physical address, name of building
- Developed by the researcher

### Action and Mobilization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis item</th>
<th>Qualifying criteria</th>
<th>Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coordinates online actions</td>
<td>Includes online petitions and letter-writing campaigns</td>
<td>From Stein: “Coordinates online actions”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans local Speakers/Workshop</td>
<td>Includes re-skilling workshops, in-person speakers on any topic</td>
<td>Developed by the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans local meetings</td>
<td>Meeting with discussion but no workshop, film; includes “potlucks with purpose”</td>
<td>Developed by the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans local actions or projects</td>
<td>Action-oriented activities such as gardening, building, and big events like fairs.</td>
<td>Adapted from Stein: “Plans local actions”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calendar of events</td>
<td>Either in list form or as an embedded calendar</td>
<td>From Stein: “Calendar of events”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Interaction and Dialog

| Member or supporter profiles (through Facebook, Twitter,) | Profiles appear on the initiative site itself | Adapted from Stein “Member or supporter profiles” |
Gmail, Yahoo, etc.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linked Facebook group</th>
<th>Group where people can “like” the initiative and make comments</th>
<th>Developed by the researcher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Member or supporter contact information</td>
<td>E-mail, phone; anonymous input tools excluded</td>
<td>From Stein: “Member or supporter contact information”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory forums</td>
<td>Any space where comments or questions are posted publicly</td>
<td>From Stein: “Participatory forums”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lateral Linkages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis item</th>
<th>Qualifying criteria</th>
<th>Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Links to Transition Town hubs</td>
<td>transitionnetwork.org, transitionus.org, transitioninaction.com</td>
<td>Adapted from Stein: “Links to SMO sites of primary movement”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to other international Environmental or Transition Organizations</td>
<td>Includes policy organizations and 350.org, which is based in the US but international in scope</td>
<td>Adapted from Stein: “Links to international SMOs”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to other national Environmental or Transition Organizations</td>
<td>Includes policy organizations</td>
<td>Adapted from Stein: “Links to national SMOs”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to local sites in line with transition goals</td>
<td>Local defined as within state, anything from environmental groups to farms, to green businesses.</td>
<td>Developed by the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to other Transition Town Initiatives</td>
<td></td>
<td>Developed by the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogroll</td>
<td>List of 3 or more blog links</td>
<td>Developed by the researcher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the research criteria listed in Table 1, three additional pieces of information were recorded: the web platform used to create the site, the number of members (when available), and the number of named authors (when available). Member numbers were taken from supplied lists on the TI’s website. Facebook membership was not used as an “official” membership count. Because Facebook lacks a space for posting higher-level
organizational information (e.g. uploaded documents, pdfs) it has been excluded as a platform for analysis. “Named author” was defined broadly to incorporate as many content-generators as possible. Contribution of photos, comments, blog posts, or articles were all construed as acts of authorship, with the only structural criteria being the inclusion of the poster’s name or profile ID.

A sampling frame of 108 official TIs was obtained from the Transition United States homepage. While the International Transition Town Network site includes over 260 initiatives in the United States, their listing was rejected because it combines fully-formed groups with organizations in the early stages of attracting a steering committee. The process of developing an initiative, as outlined on Transition United States, includes three phases. In the first phase a group of people get together to discuss a shared interest in the concept of transition. Should they decide to move towards starting an initiative, the second phase, known as “mulling” involves the creation of an active reading group that will read and discuss some of the primary transition town texts, such as Hopkins’ *Transition Town Handbook*. At this point, a member of the “mulling” group contacts the national or international organization hub to be put on the map so others who are interested might be able to find them. The final step includes forming a core team or steering committee and submitting an application to the national organization. Among the commitments US initiatives make on their application is a promise keep their website updated. Given the web-centered nature of this study, the researcher chose to limit the study to “official” TIs, or those who have formed a solid group and signed a contract to maintain an active web presence.
To select a random sample from the 108 official US initiatives included in the study, the researcher consulted a freely available random number generator developed by Dr. Mads Haar, a professor at the School of Computer Science and Statistics at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. This tool is accessible online [http://www.random.org/] and uses atmospheric noise to generate truly random numbers within a user-determined range. The generator does not offer sampling without replacement, which can cause duplicate selections to occur. To obtain 30 unique initiatives, the generator was employed 41 times, with 11 of the draws repeating earlier selections. The final sample includes the following list of TIs:

108. Transition Marbletown, Stone Ridge, NY
90. Transition Snoqualmie Valley, Carnation, WA
2. Sandpoint Transition Initiative, Sandpoint, ID
71. Transition Northfield (MA), Northfield, MA
34. Hardwick Area Transition Towns, Hardwick Area, VT
18. Transition Mount Shasta, Mount Shasta, CA
56. Transition Keene, Keene, NH
93. Transition Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI
77. Transition Newton, Newton, NJ
52. Hay River Transition Initiative, HRTI Prairie Farm, WI
6. Transition Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA
72. Pelham Transition, Pelham, MA
41. Transition Olympia, Olympia, WA
26. Transition Ann Arbor, Ann Arbor, MI
53. Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield, Westminster, CO
75. Transition Sewickley, Sewickley, PA
7. Transition Town Montpelier, Montpelier, VT
24. Transition SLO County, San Luis Obispo, CA
97. Transitions Lehigh Valley – PA, Bethlehem, PA
42. Transition Town Chelsea, Chelsea, MI
14. Transition Pima, Pima, AZ
20. Transition Louisville, Louisville, CO
10. Transition Laguna Beach, Laguna Beach, CA
62. Transition Putney, Putney, VT
38. Transition Media, Media, PA
96. Transition Joshua Tree, Joshua Tree, CA
23. Transition PDX, Portland, OR
101. Transition Port Gardner, Port Gardner, WA
In order to increase reliability, all data collection was performed by the researcher in the one week period between January 22\textsuperscript{nd} and 27\textsuperscript{th} of 2012. Choosing to use a single coder had both benefits and drawbacks. While there was no chance of inconsistency between coders, there was also no way to measure statistical significance with regard to reliability. It is entirely possible that even a single coder will introduce inconsistent application of criteria, a problem the researcher intended to guard against by employing narrow and specific guidelines for each element to be measured.

A single browser (Mozilla Firefox) was used to minimize any discrepancies in display or website functionality. For each item in the analysis, the collection was framed as an observation-based question. For example, for the item “shared video” the researcher navigated between every sub-page of each site and asked, “Does this site include shared video?” If video was found to be present, a “yes” was marked in the corresponding column of an Excel spreadsheet. For cases in which observational data proved too ambiguous to adequately judge the presence or absence of a particular item, the data was coded as “N/A” or not applicable.

The study criteria included several items with qualitative components, including coding for the presence or absence of “how-to” articles posted by members, “informative” articles posted by members, and “short news updates” posted by members. Delineations related to structure (the presence of steps in the case of how-to) and length (the difference between a “short news” and an “informative” article) were made in order to assist in consistent and accurate coding.
Challenges and Solutions

Producing high quality content analysis data requires a well-defined and neatly bounded sampling unit, such as one page in a book, or a single episode of a television show. In this study, creating a discrete “sample” from the web, which is essentially a vast field of interconnected nodes, was a challenge. Ning, one of the popular web-based platforms used by TIs, has been employed to create not only single initiative sites, but statewide sites within which there are dozens of groups, some thematic, others serving as the central site for a particular town-based or regional initiative. In these cases, the “official” Ning group for the town or regional initiative was considered to be the whole site in its entirety, which in practice eliminates some authorship and contributions made by a regional initiative (e.g. Transition Montpelier) to another local Ning group that extends the transition mission (e.g. Vermont’s statewide permaculture group). Often it was clear that certain regional or town initiative members were posting only in thematic groups and not in their “home” group; these postings were not counted as they would have extended the boundaries of the sample considerably beyond a locale. However, if an initiative’s main site was a Ning group within a statewide network that connected them with other TIs, this was considered enough to meet the criteria for the presence of a lateral linkage to other TIs. Arguably this is a structural link forged without the clear intention of an embedded hyperlink, but the presence of the connection was significant to the TIs operation and thus has been included.

The choice to exclude Facebook was another difficult methodological decision. For most initiatives, this profile was intended to augment an autonomous website. Unfortunately it often included more participatory and diverse authorship than the
website itself, almost as if participatory forums had been outsourced to Facebook and therefore did not appear on the home site for the group. Despite this complicating factor, it was determined that a sampling unit could not include Facebook pages and a formal website as their varied structures and use could not be clearly articulated in a single analysis.

Though the content analysis had been pre-tested, it’s not surprising that a few qualification issues arose once the testing itself was underway. The definition of “international organization” was not as self-explanatory as anticipated, as it could be interpreted as referring to organizations based outside of the United States, or organizations with an international scope of operations, regardless of location. Given that the Transition Town Movement itself is international by the later criteria, this definition was preferred in determining lateral linkages. 350.org, which is based in the United States but coordinates actions around the world, became a commonly cited link that met the criteria. The Transition Network site (which is out of the UK) was counted toward the “transition town hub” criteria and not as an international organization (thereby preventing any double counts).

Where elements appeared on the site posed another challenge to the data collection. For example, could a bibliography appear in a discussion post or did it need to be in a headed sub-page of the website? Given that this study was intended to focus on how web spaces were used, and not what structural features a given platform provided, the decision was made to count any content that fit the item description regardless of its location within the site.
Interviews

Interviews served as a secondary method in this study. Representatives from seven Transition Initiatives within the thirty selected for content analysis were contacted via e-mail or other web-based methods provided through the TI website itself. Four individuals responded, representing three initiatives: Transition Putney, VT (two respondents), Transition Montpelier, VT (one respondent), and Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield, CO (one respondent).

The 13 questions asked of respondents were intended to augment or provide deeper understanding of trends observed in the content analysis. The interviews were conducted by phone, audio recorded, and transcribed by the researcher. Coding for major research themes was performed, and in the discussion section interview trends and excerpts are brought to bear on the three primary research questions in this study.

Consistency in response proved a challenge in the interview process. While each respondent received the same questions, the depth with which respondents answered each question varied greatly. The most successful topics received substantial coverage by at least two respondents. In these scenarios, it is possible to examine the differences between the TI websites coupled with the expressed commentary given by interview respondents.
Discussion

In the following sections, the results of the content analysis are presented in tables alongside discussion of the research questions, relevant findings, and related interview data. From a methodological perspective, it was clear from the interview data that content analysis of websites could provide only the most basic understanding of how TIs had been sharing information. Some of the data did suggest that certain platforms facilitated sharing across a wider horizontal subsection of TI membership, but there was a highly social element to how many people participated and whether or not hierarchical practices emerged. While many TIs appeared to be sharing information digitally in diverse ways (through RSS feeds, email, article postings, and video), interview data revealed that even more sharing was occurring in the physical world through fliers, print advertisements, and radio. While the sample for this part of the study was far too small to draw significant conclusions, variables such as socioeconomics, community size, politics, linguistic diversity, and level of tech savvy seemed to play a role in which forms of sharing proved most central to achieving a given TI’s objectives.

Participatory Process and Pragmatic Hierarchies

The content analysis data revealed that many TIs foster participatory spaces for members to create and share knowledge with their organization, a rather dramatic proportion when compared with Stein’s findings among SMOs. In Stein’s study, only 20.9% of sites examined included participatory forums (p. 760), whereas among TIs the
figure was 56%. In Stein’s study only 8.1% of SMO sites provided member profiles (p. 760), as compared with 33% among TIs. Among the criteria unique to this study, it’s noteworthy that while over 75% of websites examined contained leadership speeches or mission information, a more centralized “organizer” produced element, 60% also had article-length contributions from members, and 66% had shorter pieces contributed by members.

Table 2: Participatory Modes of Sharing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website Element</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short news / updates by local members</td>
<td>66.7% (20)</td>
<td>33.3% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative articles written by local members</td>
<td>60% (18)</td>
<td>40% (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How-to articles written by local members</td>
<td>16.7% (5)</td>
<td>83.3% (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles by non-members shared by members</td>
<td>76.7% (23)</td>
<td>23.3% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership speeches (including mission)</td>
<td>76.7% (23)</td>
<td>23.3% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member or supporter profiles (through Facebook, Twitter, Gmail, Yahoo, etc.)</td>
<td>33.3% (10)</td>
<td>66.7% (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked Facebook group</td>
<td>56.7% (17)</td>
<td>43.3% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory forums</td>
<td>56.7% (17)</td>
<td>43.3% (13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While this study suggests that many TIs facilitate participatory sharing through their websites, whether that sharing occurs, or is the primary mode of sharing for the group is another matter. When examined beside the interview data, it appears that there
are roughly three factors engaged in the presence or absence of “horizontal” or participatory modes of knowledge sharing.

The first is social – how many people have deep enthusiasm for the project? As suggested by Kavanaugh & Patterson (2002), web-based sharing environments are less likely to increase civic engagement and more likely to channel existing engagement. Some of the TI websites within the sample appeared to have been produced by one or two very invested community members, who may have created a highly interactive and participatory website structure but lacked a social cohort to help populate it with ideas.

The second issue has to do with what kind of web-based platform was chosen for the TI’s website. While some allowed for a wide range of multimedia sharing, others appeared to be maintained by a single webmaster, with original HTML coding presenting a high barrier to entry for other members who might have otherwise contributed content.

The third issue is an observed tendency toward hierarchy or organizational “roles” among content authors. It appears that many initiatives have either maintained a core steering committee as outlined in the beginning phases of TI development in the Hopkins model, or that certain members have settled into leadership roles, participating more heavily in adding content to the website than others. Among the largest TIs, there seems to be a tiered structure of participation, in which no more than half of all official members participate in adding content to the site (be it in the form of comments, articles, or photos). Table 3 includes the sharing rates for every initiative in the sample with a publicly stated membership over fifty. It’s worth noting that there is a great deal of missing data in this chart from sites with less participatory platforms (e.g. no user profiles or member “groups” that reveal the total participant count). The data in Table 3 only truly
pertains to the websites that are already structured so as to facilitate higher levels of participation. The platforms employed by each site have been included along with the data for greater clarity.

Table 3: Authorship Ratios and TI Website Platforms (TIs >50 members only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative Name</th>
<th>Number of Members</th>
<th>Number of Content Authors</th>
<th>Percentage of Members Generating Content</th>
<th>Website Platform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition Snoqualmie Valley</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>Ning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Mount Shasta</td>
<td>754</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Keene</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
<td>WordPress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Milwaukee</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>Ning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Newton</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>Ning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Montpelier</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>Ning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Louisville</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>WordPress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Houston</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
<td>WordPress, Ning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While there is significant variation among this subset of the sample, it does appear that not everyone who has had the option to participate in sharing information with the group has chosen to do so. A follow-up study might examine the role played by “super-authors” or the most frequent contributors to each site, whose contribution levels were not tracked as part of this study, but were noted as a commonly shared phenomenon.

Organizing and “Letting Go”
Interviews with transition organizers revealed that the organizational portrait suggested by a TI’s website is rarely the whole story, and may have little relationship to the true organizing structure or degree of participation on the ground. Transition Putney, which is located in Southern Vermont, presents a useful case study in this regard. Their website is maintained by a single webmaster, a member of their core group who solicits content and makes all posts and design changes to the site. They are a very active TI, with diverse projects including a community garden, re-skilling workshop program, local farmer’s market, and community assets project, among others. Their website is highly informative, and includes a number of useful background and how-to articles, as well as a substantial bibliography. It does not however include discussion forums or other participatory features, save a small Facebook plugin; most information sharing and organizational work is achieved through other means of communication, such as e-mail and face-to-face contact. Transition Putney’s e-mail listserv includes at least 300-350 members, but their core steering committee is comprised of seven to eight people, four of whom have seen the project through since its inception.

Both members of Transition Putney whom I spoke with, Robyn O’Brien and Simon Renault, discussed the challenge of creating an organizing structure in which the work of transition could be dispersed among an empowered community, rather than remaining in the hands of the initial core group. O’Brien explained that the core group had outlived the planned demise proposed by the Hopkins model, and that the group was facing important questions about how to enter into a new phase of transition for the Putney community:

One of the ways we’ve personalized it is that the template says a year, and we’ve been doing this for two years and it’s generated a lot of discussion about, you
know, are we gatekeepers and, as an initiating group, when do you let go? How do you let go? Is there enough energy in the community to let go? What happens when we let go?

Renault commented on how successful the steering committee had been at gathering, vetting, and promoting ideas for Transition Putney over the past two years, perhaps achieving such success that time seemed to slip by without a major call for change. His interpretation was that the community came to see the core committee itself as Transition Putney, and offered brilliant ideas but expected the core committee to take the lead on putting them into practice. In the few months prior to the interview, the group had been in contact with a transition organizer from Massachusetts, Tina Clark, who had provided advice and guidance to them in the past. The group has begun to plan a large scale celebration and “great unleashing” for the early summer, in which the work done by Transition Putney thus far would be celebrated, and Putney community members would have a chance to come together over food and music to envision a more community-wide dispersal of the project. At this point, the core group would begin to disband and allow the working groups to pursue a more horizontal organizing model. Renault explained Clark’s advice about ushering in this new era:

She said, hey you guys the model is that you’re supposed to give up your power. You’re supposed to at some point say, we’re not transition, actually we’re stepping down and other people are taking over, creating this flow of empowerment.

The challenges faced by Transition Putney in determining when and how to shift their organization into a more horizontally oriented mode suggest that between a TI’s initial formation and its dispersal into a broader community project lies a period of real social negotiation, which may or may not be evident in the web spaces created by the group. The structure of a website might reflect an early phase of a TI’s organizing needs and is not always kept up to date with subsequent shifts in approach.
Web Platforms and Participation

In very concrete ways, choice of web platform for the TI website has a tremendous impact on how that TI is able to share information. The groups in the sample employ a wide range of platforms, from the most locally generated HTML sites to WordPress blog-style sites and Ning sites, which provides a highly participatory platform for sharing text, photos and video. Table 4 represents the sites in the sample by platform. The most frequently used commercial platforms, whether employed “out of the box” or significantly modified, were WordPress and Ning. Locally designed sites were the third largest group, followed by Google sites. Two TIs used less well-known commercial platforms, Yola and Wild Apricot, while a final group lacked a website entirely.

Table 4: TI Website Platform Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Web Platform Types</th>
<th>Number of Initiatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Google Sites</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WordPress</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ning</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yola</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild Apricot</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the WordPress platform seemed to facilitate the creation of a strong external “face” for individual TIs and plenty of space for web administrators to post original articles and links. Typically the participatory elements of the site included comment space at the end of posted articles, where those adding comments might choose to share their identity or remain anonymous. While TIs using WordPress tended to provide a diversity of options for information sharing, including RSS feeds, links to Facebook or Twitter, or comment space, they maintain some hierarchy in modes of
sharing, with designated web administrators responsible for the creation of official posts. Given the structural absence of “member” profiles on many of these sites, it was sometimes hard to tell how many people were involved with the TI, especially if the comment traffic was sparse.

In contrast to WordPress, Ning sites were characterized by a lack of “external face,” with much greater emphasis placed on interaction among TI members. The platform shares a number of characteristics with social networking sites, including member profiles (which can be merged with Google, Yahoo, or Facebook profiles), multiple avenues for content sharing, and the facilitation of groups. As Margaret Emerson from Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield characterized Ning, “it’s like a little miniature version of Facebook, but it’s private and only for a certain group of people who have joined for a certain purpose.” Of the TIs in the sample, at least four had a Ning group within a statewide Ning site: Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield (Colorado Transition Network), Transition Louisville (Colorado Transition Network), Transition Montpelier (Transition Vermont), and Transition Houston (Transition Texas).

These groups had the benefit of gathering members not only around a regionally-specific organization, but across the state around particular themes. For example, some members of the Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield group might also be members of the statewide Alternative Energy and Transportation group. Discussion forums are typically the primary site of sharing on Ning sites, although people also upload their photos and videos to share with the group. It is possible to create a Ning site with more of a traditional “informative” web presence. Transition Milwaukee has succeeded in creating a series of tabs on their Ning site that provide access to official
information about their TI and its projects. Transition Montpelier has made a more group-specific “official” space within their area of the statewide site by posting their newsletters for download from the group “homepage.”

The locally produced sites varied widely in level of complexity. Of the seven within the sample, three had some form of participatory forum; Transition Port Gardner offered a very simple dialog box entry for discussion points, Transition Putney used a Facebook plugin, and Shasta Commons had an advanced system for posting comments and “advertisements” for barter or exchange.

**Transition Initiative Web Use**

Interview respondents provided insight into some of the issues facing TIs with regard to web functionality and organizing structure. Each of the three groups in the interview sample had encountered a unique set of challenges, both structural and social.

When I spoke with Transition Putney, they were just beginning to think about how they might create a new website with greater participatory functionality. Although their current site provides excellent background information about transition, its maintenance by a single member of the core team has made it less of an informally participatory space. As O’Brien explained:

There’s a lot lacking, and there’s a lot that is getting done. It falls mostly on Daniel’s shoulders and it’s too much, and that’s one of our questions for Tina [transition organizer and trainer from Massachusetts], is you know how do we share that effectively? I am intimidated by the website. I should be adding content but I don’t...

Both O’Brien and Renault felt that as they worked toward a great unleashing, in which the work of transition would be dispersed to working groups and the community at large, they wanted a site that would provide both an external face for the organization and lower barriers to access for content authors throughout the community. Renault described an
ideal site in which individual working groups could post updates related to their ongoing projects:

What I had in mind, and I think that’s what we’re moving toward, is having the working groups really be the face of transition - it has to be the case online obviously, on the website, so how does one create a website that basically includes everybody? I mean maybe there is the front page which explains what transition is about and then each working group has access to their page that they update regularly, and maybe have some links – like the farmer’s market is one of our projects and the farmer’s market now has it’s own website so maybe links to that, links to Facebook pages.

Transition Putney has a group on the statewide Vermont Ning site, but aside from some events posting, it does not appear to be a primary sharing hub. Transition Montpelier does use their Ning group on the statewide page as a primary organizing space, and the discussion forums there get heavier traffic. This can be useful in that a great deal of information is exchanged in a space people can visit at their convenience, a benefit discussed by Garrett (2006). However, it’s not without drawbacks. When this study began, the Vermont Ning site could be viewed by members and non-members alike, with limited information kept “members-only.” But over the course of the study the site received what Dan Costin referred to as some form of “attacks” or explosive exchanges on the discussion boards, and at the present writing, it has been made “member-only” after a temporary shutdown. As Costin explained:

Some people seem to come on a lot, and get into these commentary discussions that get very lengthy and go on for a very long time and there have been some people that might get a little bit out of line in their comments and it creates work for the website administrator you know who has to keep track of that try to keep anything unsavory off the website. And then I heard just vaguely, I got an e-mail from the website administrator who said they actually had to shut the whole website down because of, I think what he called like attacks – there was just very inappropriate stuff on the website … I never saw anything like this so I don’t have any personal experience with why it was shut down and when I tried to look the site was shut down I couldn’t do anything…
Costin also pointed out that not everyone in the group uses the Ning site to communicate. Much like Transition Putney, Transition Montpelier relies on a robust e-mail list for much of its regular communication.

Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield, which also uses a Ning group within a statewide site (Colorado Transition Network), has been heavily reliant on the platform to facilitate effective communication among group members. When she first started the group, organizer Margaret Emerson had used Meetup.com to arrange coffee gatherings and discussions around the transition concept. But as she explained in her interview, Ning wound up being more useful in its versatility and the manner in which content could be made open and freely available on the Web:

I have to say that I don’t think we could have gone as far as we have without the Ning site - unless we had made it a meetup – but then it’s kind of closed. The beauty of the Ning site was that we could announce upcoming activities on the site, we also used it – because you know part of the transition handbook was trying to develop some kind of energy descent plan - and we started using the Ning site as a discussion forum for ideas on that. So we would have meeting minutes for our meeting about the energy descent plan and we would post it right there on the Ning site so that everyone who was a member of our transition initiative but could not attend those monthly meetings could see what we were discussing and kind of like what the minutes were of the meeting and what was brought up so it was very open and very transparent. …we would also use the Ning site as a way to say, ok this Saturday we’re having a community work day on the garden, we’re bringing in manure and we need some volunteers to come spread it out, this and that. Or, we’re building a hoop house and we need ten volunteers to come on Saturday or Sunday. So we would really use the Ning site to keep our group informed about what was going on, when it was happening and what the progress was – and also just to post discussions so it was tremendously helpful.

For this group, the organizing variables may be somewhat different than they were for Putney and Montpelier, which ended up using e-mail much more heavily than other online participatory spaces. According to Emerson, Westminster, Arvada, and Broomfield are all suburbs of a decent size, in which neighbors did not necessarily know
one another. The online space became an important place for people to find out about the local TI, and Emerson perceived that nearly all members became involved to some degree because of online research:

When I ask people, how did you find out about us, almost everyone said they Googled something and they found the transition Ning site and this was back, like I said two years ago, it’s not something I’m hearing recently but definitely even if it’s like Transition Colorado which is a non-profit organization in Boulder – let’s say they had some kind of public talk then, those people who came to the public talk, came because of something they saw on the Internet, but then they came to the talk and became interested, and learned about the Ning site, but even if they didn’t learn about the Ning site directly from Google they learned about some event or some public talk or some workshop through the Internet somehow – I would say 95%.

Emerson felt that having forums, rather than direct e-mail communication, was the most efficient way to organize ongoing activities for the group. She felt that although the group was tech savvy, having the Ning platform available saved them the headache of trying to figure out how to create an open asynchronous communication system:

I don’t know how we would have done this especially when, at the height we might have had 50 or 60 people involved in different aspects of the community garden or this and that, it would just be crazy like trying to send e-mails back and forth or something… I don’t know how we would have done it, unless one of us was some kind of IT person and knew how to figure out some sort of website to create for ourselves. It really organized us and propelled out progress forward.

When asked about further website functionality she would like to have had for the group, Emerson mentioned a built-in audio chat function, such as Skype, which would allow members to “meet” without having to drive long distances to convene at each others’ homes.

Across the board, interview respondents emphasized the TI website as a space where communication could take place. While both Transition Putney and Transition Montpelier used e-mail to do much of their day-to-day organizing, Transition Putney especially is hoping to create a more dynamic “hub” online, where those working on
transition-related projects can share and coordinate with other community members. Publicizing or sharing the TI’s work beyond the local community it served seemed less important to interview respondents, whose primary goal was to facilitate ongoing TI projects. This orientation is consistent Diani’s typology for SMOs that “[mobilize] mainly participatory resources,” in that the focus was centered on maintaining a level of action and participation among current members, rather than recruiting new members via the website (2000, p. 394).

**Diversity and Information Sharing**

The content analysis data revealed that TIs have created and shared a variety of media using diverse methods. Members have shared not only original writing about the transition concept or TI projects, but also re-posted videos and articles and uploaded photos of TI projects. Many TI websites provide some combination of RSS, email, a Facebook page, and an events calendar to keep members informed about upcoming events. Events seem to be quite diverse in type and format, including film screenings, meeting/discussions and projects/actions. Projects and actions include, among others: local currency implementation, fall fairs, community gardens, planting edibles on statehouse lawns, traders co-ops, art fairs, seed swaps, crop mobs, and a variety of collaborations with other organizations that share transition values. Some have undertaken education work that goes beyond one-off “workshops” and could be defined as a program (e.g. re-skilling schools, re-skilling series). *Table 5* outlines the various modes of information sharing observed on TI websites and associated rates.
Table 5: Diversity in Information Sharing Practices on TI Websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website Element</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared video</td>
<td>76.7% (23)</td>
<td>23.3% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared audio</td>
<td>20% (6)</td>
<td>80% (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Local/Project Photos</td>
<td>43.3% (13)</td>
<td>56.7% (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSS feed</td>
<td>53.3% (16)</td>
<td>46.7% (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail list</td>
<td>43.3% (13*)</td>
<td>56.7% (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked Facebook group</td>
<td>56.7% (17)</td>
<td>43.3% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative calendar</td>
<td>46.7% (14)</td>
<td>53.3% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further research suggestions / Bibliographies</td>
<td>66.7% (20)</td>
<td>33.3% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media/press releases</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>100% (30**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinates online actions</td>
<td>7% (2)</td>
<td>93% (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to paper or pdf Newsletter</td>
<td>7% (2)</td>
<td>93% (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to a physical collection of print, DVD resources</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>100% (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about Organization space</td>
<td>3% (1)</td>
<td>97% (29***)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans local speakers / workshops</td>
<td>83.3% (25)</td>
<td>16.7% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans local meetings</td>
<td>76.7% (23)</td>
<td>23.3% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans local film screenings</td>
<td>70% (21)</td>
<td>30% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans local actions or projects</td>
<td>56.7% (17)</td>
<td>43.3% (13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Lehigh PA’s initiative has access to an e-mail list through a parent non-profit organization; counted as “present.”
**Four had event flyers and one had a brochure for the initiative but none had a press release labeled as such.
*** Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield mentions owning a garden space.
When comparing the methods of information provision among TIs with Stein’s findings for SMOs, a much larger proportion of TIs use RSS feeds: 53.3% as opposed to Stein’s 17.4% (p. 759). The criteria for measuring e-mail use were slightly different between the two studies; Stein found that 22.1% of SMOs sampled had a “read-only listserv,” (p. 759) while this study found that 43.3% of TIs had an “e-mail list” which includes both read-only and participatory lists. While Stein does not elaborate on her criteria for determining whether a site provides “further research suggestions,” she found a much smaller number of sites with this feature among SMOs (39.5%) (p.759), than this study found among TIs (66.7%).

The most significant areas of difference in information sharing methods related to the use of “newsletters” and “media/press releases.” Among Stein’s sample, 59.3% created some type of newsletter (p. 759); among TIs, that figure was only 7%. Many TI websites seem to share project news and updates more regularly on discussion boards or within the architecture of the site itself, rather than packaging information into a newsletter, which may be a format better suited to readers less directly involved in the day to day operations of the organization. Stein also found a much higher incidence of media and press releases among SMOs, 45.3% (p. 759) as opposed to none among the TIs sampled for this study. This study did find that four TIs had posted flyers for download to help publicize an upcoming event, and one had produced a brochure advertising their TI and its projects. While these artifacts seemed to have a strong promotional quality, none could be categorized a press release intended to share projects with media outlets. It may be that TIs are more informal than SMOs in their dealings with
the media. Given that many TIs consider themselves to be less political and more oriented toward local actions that appeal to a broad spectrum of the community, they may not feel as compelled as SMOs to carefully manage their image and message. There was also very little evidence of online activism among TIs, such as petitions and e-mail writing campaigns. While Stein found that 12.8% of sampled SMOs used online petitions, 14% organized e-mail campaigns, and 18.6% coordinated online actions (p. 760), among sampled TIs only 7% (2) coordinated any of these kinds of online action.

**Online / Offline – Information Sharing and Resilience**

This study sought to discover not only the diversity of ways in which TIs are sharing information online, but also if attempts were made to share the same information both on and off the web. Redundancy can stand as evidence of resilience in information sharing systems, allowing information to reach users even in contingency situations in which one established mode is compromised. By sharing information through more channels, a TI can not only reach a broader spectrum of its community, but also create useful areas of overlap and even preservation value. The LOCKSS model, “Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe” is an example of this principle of resilience as it manifests in a library setting.

In the content analysis portion of the study, TI websites were evaluated for mention of physical collections (e.g. book lending libraries, DVD collections) and for provision of a TI “space” that was uniquely designated for TI activities and organizing. Only one TI website, Transition Putney’s, made mention of a designated office space with a physical address. Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield did mention a
garden space belonging to their TI. No TI websites made reference to a physical collection belonging to the organization.

Other features, such as the use of diverse analog and physical media to communicate about transition projects, were difficult to collect via content analysis. A great deal of information was gleaned from interviews, in which TI members provided a wealth of information about how their organizations shared resources and orchestrated their events across physical community spaces.

Transition Putney has used its physical office for a range of activities, including providing a home base for several interns who are working for the organization as part of their education at the nearby School for International Training (SIT). The office also serves as a storage and access space for a lending library, one that is not advertised on the website, but has become known to community and TI members. Unfortunately, the cost of renting a space poses a challenge. As O’Brien explains:

> We do, we have an office, it’s on Main Street and …it has a sandwich board out front that gives the hours that people are there which is a lot, and we’re not sure how long we can afford it. And there’s conversation, you know, can we do it without an office? We’re very lucky we have SIT interns who do a lot of the legwork, who work on printing up flyers, organizing events, making sure things are distributed, and reporting back, and they need and office – a space – to do their work and meet. I think it would be a drag for us not to have one. The office has a bookshelf for lending, it’s set up for workspace, there’s wifi in the building and it’s big enough to have small meetings and little gatherings, and organize ourselves - and it’s great to just have an address and a PO box.”

The mention of a sandwich board is indicative of a larger promotional trend for Transition Putney, which serves a small closely-knit community. As of the 2010 census, Putney had a population of 2,702 (U.S. Census Bureau). The downtown area is almost entirely situated around Main Street, which is a primary thoroughfare running north to south between adjacent towns; Main Street is technically a section of Route 5, the first
“highway” to run through the area. Transition Putney has used this geographic feature of the town layout to reach community members traveling through town. As Renault explains, sandwich boards and other physical media have been more effective in reaching community members than much of the digital media:

We print the newsletter but I think the one thing that keeps coming up in the last two years - that people keep talking about - is how they really get a lot of our info in terms of events from our sandwich boards on Route five, at the library and at town hall and we have another one at the co-op. And, so we have three sandwich boards and flyers for all of our events – they’re printed black and white, you know super straightforward and big sheets… and people really see them, drive by them on route five - everybody drives by route five. Those are really really essential in our communication…. The web access – really I’m not sure that the web has had a huge impact on the work that we do and I mean if we talk about Facebook and the website, it’s really hard to know – therefore it’s really just my assumption - but I’m assuming that it hasn’t really had an impact on how we reach people – on how broad our reach has been.

Transition Montpelier also uses a diversity of media to share information about their upcoming events and ongoing projects, including print and local radio. Getting the word out on the radio is a way to share the transition concept with a diverse audience of listeners. As Costin explains:

I think we do newspaper [ads], 8 and a half by 11, posters that go up around town and the e-mails, and there’s a little bit on the radio as well. We have a couple of very interesting radio stations in this area and some of our transition town members are actually hosts of radio shows - on the Goddard College community radio station, and then this other station WDEV which is really an unbelievable radio station because it’s both left and right leaning politically. They just have one guy’s show and you know he’s a die hard republican and then there’s Carl Etnier’s show which is all about peak oil and then there’s sports, motor racing, a fishing show, it’s just a really weird mix but pretty unique…. I think people really like their community radio around here and they listen to that – to you know hear about what’s going on so that’s another means that this group has used to spread the word about what they’re doing.

Unlike Transition Putney, neither Transition Montpelier nor Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield has a designated office space for their organizations. Transition Montpelier uses a variety of spaces around town, both public and commercial,
including the public library and the seating area in the local co-op deli. For their potluck events they rent out the basement of a church downtown.

Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield, which began by meeting out of homes and local coffee shops, ran into some real challenges in finding an appropriate space. They have resolved it by renting partial use of a local grange, where they can hold their events in exchange for a monthly rental fee. In choosing to rent, they have encountered some of the financial strain faced by Transition Putney. They have made good use of their commitment to the space by using some of the land the grange is built on to start another community garden. As Emerson explains:

It was a challenge because libraries have two policies where I live. Either you can get a room for free but you have to be a non-profit and it’s first come first serve and you know you can’t reserve a space if you want it for free. If you want a space where you can meet and you want it guaranteed and you want to be able to reserve it, then you have to pay like 75 bucks or something, or 50 bucks. But then you’d have to ask the question, who’s going to pay that and that was a problem – some of our members were unemployed or underemployed and they couldn’t afford it and I didn’t want to fork over all the time to pay money for stuff like that… so one of our members decided to check out the local grange … There were some community events going on there – there was a church organization that would meet there and there was something else but it was underutilized in my opinion and so he actually went over there and he rented the space there – or the ability to have the space there. It’s a hundred dollars a month so the only thing is that when we do events we have to ask for donations so we can offset that cost. So that’s how we got that place which had a huge room – there are chairs, there was a place where we could screen documentaries or movies or whatever or videos – we could have discussions there, we could have workshops there and they had a little bit of land behind their building – maybe I would say a quarter acre where we decided to start another community garden. And we were using permaculture in our gardens so we were using the gardens as an opportunity to teach people about permaculture and to also like teach people about growing food.

Conversations with interview respondents revealed that a great deal of information sharing among TIs goes on outside of the digital realm, be it in real physical community spaces or through analog media such as flyers, sandwich boards, newspaper advertisements, and even radio. The real “place-based” nature of these undertakings
became clear when respondents addressed some of the challenges members might face in participating. As Renault from Transition Putney explained,

Many of our events are at the library for example and we’re told that some people just do not step in the library so we’ve talked about changing locations and maybe having some at Landmark College maybe having some at Peirce’s hall in East Putney.
For Transition Montpelier, it can be a challenge to gather a dispersed membership when a significant number live outside of town:

There are a considerable number of farmers and health practitioners in the group and some of them do not make a lot of money and you know some of them are sort of scattered out in the country and don’t always you know get into town for meetings but I think they’re a very important component of the group and they seem to like come in to town whenever they can. A lot of farmers sell at the winter farmer’s market and sometimes our transition potlucks are timed to be a little after the farmer’s market so they can combine those trips and you know visit with the organization.

Issues of access, both geographic and technological, overlap with a related concern for many TIs: attracting a diverse group of participants. All three groups represented in the interview sample discussed challenges they faced with regard to attracting and maintaining participation across diverse groups within the community. Diversity was framed in a variety of ways, including socio-economic, age-relate, linguistic and cultural.

For Transition Putney, part of attracting diverse participation has meant working to include community members across a range of ages and with diverse interests and politics, and in particular working hard to foster a welcoming and inclusive image that defies the stereotypes about leftie or hippie organizing. This has meant refraining from involving the Transition Initiative in local efforts to shut down the nuclear power plant in nearby Vernon, Vermont. As O’Brien explains:

We’d love to see more youth involved and to that end we are working with Emily Jones from Putney school who’s working with all six schools in our area to create a Putney youth core so we’ll see that come along but in terms of the 20somethings, it’s happening a little bit, and across socioeconomics - where I see
that happening most effectively is in the re-skilling workshops because the re-skilling workshops have covered everything from hunting to cooking and building chicken coops, composting, and gardening. They really just cut away anything that may smack of “that’s too intellectual” or “that’s too hippie” or too whatever. We’ve really worked hard to not exclude or appear cliquish in any way whatsoever. In fact we just made a decision not to host a “shut down Vermont Yankee” forum as transition town – three of us as individuals helped out but not under transition town because it’s got to be politics-free.

Renault talked about the importance of including the Putney business community in transition work by figuring out how local assets and local currency work might overlap with the business community’s interests:

A year an a half ago we had Michael Schuman come…He wrote The Small-Mart Revolution, he came to Putney we had a Putney economic summit and that sort of generated a lot of ideas, generated a lot of momentum and engaged a lot of people – some of them being the sort of more business community, so we have a local investment group now, we have the directors of schools – administrators of all the schools in Putney have started to get together and those are people… who, before that, were not getting involved with transition related stuff. So after that event, they started getting involved. We have now a Putney jobs breakfast…the second Thursday of every month between 7:15-8:30 in the morning we have Putney jobs breakfast and it really gathers mostly business people…

Costin noted that for Transition Montpelier there is tremendous economic diversity in the group; some members work as doctors and engineers, others as farmers. While he perceived that most community members had Internet and were able to access TI materials online, the geographic component of being a TI member was more complicated. He noted that part of the reason the group holds its potlucks on days when the farmer’s market is held is to facilitate easier among farmers for whom the trip into town might be both costly and time consuming. He explained that:

I think the average agricultural worker in Vermont makes like $10,000 a year. It’s really pretty crazy - a lot of people are doing it part time or have two jobs to make things work. I don’t really know how you make a living doing agriculture nowadays but, people are trying to do it and I love to have them in the organization, but I think it drains you lot to try to make that happen and you don’t always have time for these fun organizational potlucks.
Emerson noted that Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield had tried unsuccessfully to recruit more Hispanic members of their community to the TI, and that for lower-income Spanish-speakers, there may have been a double obstacle posed by language barriers and limited access to technology. She also felt that there might have been a generational drop-off in participation among community members over seventy, likely due to technology access issues. For this TI, which Emerson felt had really coalesced by computer-mediated means, lack of regular access to a computer was perceived as a major barrier to participation:

We are not reaching the Hispanic population at all, like zero, especially the low-income Hispanic population because well a lot of them, especially in Broomfield, not only do they not have computers, sometimes they don’t speak very good English. But we actually created a Spanish flyer to advertise the community garden because we thought maybe they’d want to come and join the garden and maybe we don’t speak Spanish but it’s gardening, we can figure it out and we didn’t really get anybody on the hook for that, we weren’t able to attract anybody but we definitely talked about how mostly what we’re seeing are people who have access to a computer at home, know how to use the internet, are pretty technologically savvy – very elderly people, we didn’t see a lot of those – maybe very elderly people like seventy plus aren’t computer savvy or they don’t have one, so we didn’t see people in that age bracket, we didn’t see very low income people - people who maybe couldn’t afford a computer or Internet.

Overall, content analysis and interview data suggested that TIs were sharing information in a variety of ways, both online and through offline methods such as flyers, radio, and print media. To some extent, this diversity seemed oriented toward the marketing needs of individual TIs, allowing them to reach a greater number of community members by using a combination of methods. One question that remained only partially answered was whether this diversity in information sharing methods contributed significantly to the resilience of the organizations and their knowledge production. While interview data pointed to the possibility that TIs might make resources available to members and their communities in print and through their websites, it was unclear how much of the material
shared by participants who taught local re-skilling workshops was repeated online or in print libraries. Within the sample, 83% of TIs coordinated local speakers or re-skilling workshops through their websites, while only 16.7% had posted “how-to” articles. Future research might further explore whether locally produced knowledge about increasing resilience is actually being shared and stored by resilient means.

Local vs. “Global”: Transition Initiatives as Place-based and Transnational

The content analysis data suggested that TIs are more highly connected (via active hyperlinks) with local groups that share goals or principles with the TI and with official transition “hubs” than they are with other national or international environmental or transition-related organizations. Exactly half of the TI websites contained links to other TIs, often within their home state or region. Local connections were often made to farms, other non-profit organization or networks, and occasionally to infrastructure providers.

Among the nine TIs that did link to an international organization, five of them linked to 350.org, which is somewhat similar to the TT Movement in its use of the web to help individual groups organize place-based actions in conjunction with a mission that has some transnational consistency. For 350.org, the shared determination among global participants is to bring the carbon dioxide levels down to 350ppm, the scientifically stated upper range at which global climate change could be brought into check (“Our Mission,” n. d.). Specific methods and political or legislative goals may differ between groups or nations. It seems appropriate that 350.org would be a common reference point for TIs as it could be defined as a relatively apolitical political organization. Organizers have maintained a very narrowly determined mission that allows for broad participation among those who agree that climate change is a reality, 64% of the population in the United
States according to a 2011 study of attitudes about climate change (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf & Smith).

While Stein’s criteria for evaluating linkages were somewhat different from the criteria used in this study, it might be useful to compare the 61.6% of her sample that contained links to “SMO sites of the primary movement” (p. 761) with the 76.7% of sites in this study that contained links to “transition hubs.” Stein also found that 27.9% of her sample contained links to “international SMOs,” while 51.2% contained links to “national SMOs” (p. 761). In this study the corresponding link rates for international and national environmental and transition organizations were 30% and 53.3%, respectively – highly consistent with Stein’s findings.

Table 6: Local and “Global” Linking Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website Element</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Links to Transition Town hubs (transitionnetwork.org, transitionus.org)</td>
<td>76.7% (23)</td>
<td>23.3% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to other international Environmental or Transition Orgs</td>
<td>30% (9)</td>
<td>70% (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to other national Environmental or Transition Orgs</td>
<td>53.3% (16)</td>
<td>46.7% (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to local sites in line with transition goals</td>
<td>70% (21)</td>
<td>30% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to other Transition Town Initiatives</td>
<td>50% (15)</td>
<td>50% (15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The TI websites revealed a striking combination of structuring principles and values obtained at a transnational level, primarily from Rob Hopkins and the Transition Network, and the expression of uniquely local projects suited to the TI’s home community and its needs. For some groups, defining the degree to which the TI would
be truly “local” was an organizing challenge. O’Brien of Transition Putney explained how important it was for the TI to keep most of its work local to the town of Putney itself, rather than incorporating activities in nearby Brattleboro, a much larger community:

Really we are very local. In our bylaws we are 05346, so that does encompass Westminster West and East Dummerston and then there are things that are specified as a Transition Initiative elsewhere that we’ve vetted and this is a question that has come up, you know, why can’t you advertise this thing that’s happening in Brattleboro? Well because it’s happening in Brattleboro... I think it really has remained pretty darn local.

As Renault explains, keeping the TI and its projects local is really about fostering community growth at the most basic geographic level, so that Putney community members feel that a diversity of needs can be met right in Putney, including food and health care but also more intangibles, like social engagement:

Last year the farmer’s market had more than 70,000 dollars in gross sales …$70,000 that were spent locally and therefore promoted local agriculture … therefore food that was not shipped to Putney, therefore in that very small scale contributing to less carbon emissions. Those are big ideas. I think on a much broader level – contributing to building a healthier community and also, and beyond all the numbers, beyond all the concepts of carbon emissions and all these dreadful things, every Sunday, people got together and talked to each other and had fun together and sat down together and had lunch… and made plans for getting together again and suddenly they got their entertainment right here in Putney … they got their social needs fulfilled here in Putney. They didn’t have to go to Brattleboro to watch a movie to get their entertainment need fulfilled.

For Transition Putney, keeping the project local is connected to a commitment to keep the work politics-free. While the transition concept was developed with peak oil and the climate crisis in mind, the TI is “not a doomsday group” as O’Brien puts it. Rather, by focusing on concrete local actions that are not only smart planning for a world with less cheaply available oil, but promote community cohesiveness and social wellbeing, the TI can be a tremendously positive force in a very specific locale. As O’Brien explains:
We don’t just want to talk about being a well-knit community, we’re doing it - in all these different ways and across different age groups and different attitudes toward politics you know, whatever, it’s really that transition has been able to bridge so much. Abstaining from politics is not a consistent practice across all TIs. Emerson explained that for Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield, the TI served as a space where people could share their particular concerns:

There’s a huge activist dimension. One of the things that I noticed about our initiative is that people would come with different concerns. Some people were really all about what are we going to do about the price of oil and the availability of cheap oil … Some people were really about the sustainability of food, they were interested in things like anti-GMO or anti-pesticides and herbicides and so there was a wide variety of passions that each person had. Some people were really into the whole economy collapsing thing and so, these people when we’d get together in discussions they really wanted to first of all meet other people who were open to hearing these things and wouldn’t ridicule them for being activists or for being passionate about what they believed and also they wanted to be able to have a venue to sort of spread the truth about whatever they’re passionate about so like “I want to be able to let people in our community know about the dangers of X” or whatever, so there’s a huge activism thing…

For Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield, having a safe space to share ideas and a platform to spread information about particular social and environmental issues that may be national or international was useful. In some ways, the group has remained outside of the mainstream, a position that may have as much to do with the scale of the community as the TI’s organizing structure. Emerson raised some of the challenges the group had faced in translating the transition model to their specific locale, which is far more metropolitan than Totnes, England where the TT Movement took shape. A TI’s Energy Descent Action Plan (EDAP) is a highly localized document that accounts for a variety of local resources and infrastructure. Developing an EDAP that is feasible requires a high level of buy-in from the community and local government officials, something Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield found daunting given the combined size of their three
communities coupled with cultural differences between the US and the UK. As Emerson explains:

What we realized is that something like an energy descent plan needs to be an undertaking of at least like 10% of the population or something. And it needs experts and people who know about city infrastructure and we didn’t know about stuff like that. Like in Totnes, I don’t remember what their population was but obviously it was a lot less than where we live but I heard that the amount of people who came to the great unleashing was something to the effect of 10% of the population of that town, which, that would be like 25,000 people here. And so we started thinking wait a minute, after all this, does this model even work for you know a large city in the United States – it worked for a little village in England. And I think also, we have a different culture in the United States, maybe it’s somewhat similar to England but my feeling was that our culture here in the US is very individualistic, every man for himself, pull yourself up by the boot straps, it’s a very self-centered culture and we’re not very community oriented by nature. I mean most people in most neighborhoods in the suburbs don’t know their neighbors, that’s the reality.

The content analysis and interview data about how TIs act in “local” and “global” ways suggested several discrete issues were impacting the nature of information sharing. While TIs frequently use links to or re-share information from the national and international hubs, they also frequently make connections with more local organizations that share their values and investments. The role of politics in information sharing might be locally determined, despite certain direction from national and international Transition Town Movement leadership. Finally, Emerson from Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield raises important questions about how well a transnationally employed model might work on the ground in different locales with various cultural and population differences. While this question is beyond the scope of the current study, it may indicate an area for further research.
Conclusion

In this study, I have explored some of the dimensions of information sharing behavior among Transition Initiatives. Through examination of TI organizing, use of TI websites, and implementation of values around diversity and resilience, this research has pointed to several areas for meaningful observations and further research. The range in degree of website use, including the number of content authors represented in discussion boards, suggests that the social aspects of website use matter in more fundamental ways than the structural ones. Interview data compounded this point, suggesting that examining a TI’s website cannot fully reveal the details of its use, including who uses it, for what purposes it is used or not used, and whether the TI members and community respond more heavily to online or offline sharing. All interview respondents did indicate that they were using some form of asynchronous information communication technology as their primary mode of sharing within their group and its wider community base, but not always a website. Both Transition Montpelier and Transition Putney emphasized the role of e-mail over sharing that occurred through the website.

Despite this social dimension of website use, the choice of website platform and what kinds of sharing might be facilitated by structural decisions did play a role in how TIs were sharing information. TIs employed a wide variety of platforms, each of which carries its own distinctive orientations. For example Ning sites offered a high number of modes for sharing among members, creating the possibility for a more internally focused
organizational website. In contrast, WordPress and certain locally produced sites exhibited hierarchies between the TI as a whole and those who shared information via the website. Unlike Ning sites, these spaces produced a higher degree of formal or external-facing information.

Linking patterns suggested that while TIs were looking heavily to national and international hubs to provide some of their content, they were also well connected with locally-based organizations. Many participated in significant sharing in the form of short and longer informative articles about a variety of themes, including local projects and broader topics around the transition concept. While pragmatic hierarchies seem to have formed within a good number of TIs, both with regard to formal organizational structure and information sharing habits, it is worth noting that the nature of the projects addressed by TIs appear to work against hierarchy through their emphasis on holistic community wellbeing. On the Transition Network’s website, the authors suggest that one of the many reasons people get involved in transition work is that “transition is an invitation to be part of changing the place you live, to be part of a process of making it more entrepreneurial, better connected, happier and healthier.” (“Why do Transition?” n. d.) This is precisely the kind of approach advocated by Holloway, who contrasts it with hierarchy as a more bounded strategy that compartmentalizes life. In “seizing power” as opposed to “dissolving” it he has described hierarchy the following way:

At the top of the hierarchy we learn to place that part of our activity that contributes to ‘building the revolution,’ at the bottom come frivolous personal things like affective relations, sensuality, playing, laughing, loving. Class struggle becomes puritanical: frivolity must be suppressed because it does not contribute to the goal. The hierarchisation of struggle is a hierarchisation of our lives and thus a hierarchisation of ourselves.” (16-17)
This kind of “hierarchisation” of the self was something that interview respondents suggested their TIs work against in myriad ways, by embracing the social and community benefit of a project that is linked to building “a revolution” but not defined solely by that orientation.

Both the content analysis and interview data suggested that TIs were employing a diversity of methods for sharing information, although the degree to which that diversity contributed to more “resilient” systems of knowledge creation remained unanswered. Interviews indicated that a great deal of information about TI spaces, print resources, or innovative forms of information sharing could not be easily gleaned from website content analysis. The Transition Putney respondents, who emphasized the role of sandwich boards in their organizing efforts, suggested that TIs might be practicing highly place-based offline methods to communicate with their communities.

This study has produced some useful data about website use by a group of organizations invested in creating local action around building stronger and better communities. Further research into the lived-experience of community members engaged in TIs might help to answer additional questions about how transition-related information moves through communities and whether community networks of sharing reflect the resilience that may have motivated their development. Due to the geographic and cultural specificity of these communities and their organizing efforts, future research might employ more place-based anthropological methods.

Although a great deal more research is needed on how organizations that operate within “contemporary discourses of transition” share information and build knowledge, there are still valuable lessons to be learned at this early stage of understanding. Libraries
and other information-related organizations could benefit tremendously from noting the impact of grassroots information sharing on community wellbeing. Nearly every TI begins with people reading and discussing books together, a practice these organizations have in common with book clubs offered in public libraries and community centers everywhere. But unlike an ordinary book club, TIs move from reading to building their own spaces and channels by which to share information about the particular places in which they live. Whether that’s how to create a root cellar in a given climate, or how to create a barter and timeshare program that meets the needs of a particular community, this place-based sharing of ideas is exciting, and perhaps, as Chowdhury, Poulter & McMenemy (2006) have argued, a practice libraries could help support.

In providing support to grassroots information sharing projects, libraries and other organizations that deal with information sharing would be wise to consider Dervin’s observation (1994) that while many of our modern institutions consider diversity something that must be tamed or controlled, among those who embrace a communitarian approach, diversity is an asset. Indeed, for a community to fully participate in its own development of knowledge, incomplete ontologies must not only be permitted but encouraged as conceptual spaces in which tremendous growth might take place.
References


Kavanaugh, A.L. & Patterson, S.J. (2002). The impact of community computer networks on social capital and community involvement in Blacksburg, in Wellman, B. &


http://www.nei.org/resourcesandstats/nuclear_statistics/nuclearwasteamountsandsitestorage/


Appendix A: List of Official United States Transition Town Initiatives

Listed online in numerical order as follows at http://transitionus.org/initiatives-map

1. Transition Colorado, Boulder County, CO
2. Sandpoint Transition Initiative, Sandpoint, ID
3. Community Rising, Ketchum, ID
4. Transition Cotati, Cotati, CA
5. Transition Town Lyons, Lyons, CO
6. Transition Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA
7. Transition Town Montpelier, Montpelier, VT
8. Transition Initiative Portland, Portland, ME
9. Transition Sebastopol, Sebastopol, CA
10. Transition Laguna Beach, Laguna Beach, CA
11. Pine Mountain's Let's Live Local, Pine Mountain, CA
12. Transition Town Ashland, Ashland, OR
13. Sustainable Berea, Berea, KY
14. Transition Pima, Pima, AZ
15. Transition Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA
16. Transition Denver, Denver, CO
17. Transition Whatcom, Whatcom, WA
18. Transition Mount Shasta, Mount Shasta, CA
19. Sustainable NE Seattle, NE Seattle, WA
20. Transition Louisville, Louisville, CO
21. Transition Newburyport, Newburyport, MA
22. Transition Paso Robles, Paso Robles, CA
23. Transition PDX, Portland, OR
24. Transition SLO County, San Luis Obispo, CA
25. Transition Town Hohenwald, Hohenwald, TN
26. Transition Ann Arbor, Ann Arbor, MI
27. Transition OKC, Oklahoma City, OK
28. Transition West Marin, West Marin, CA
29. Sustainable Tucson, Tucson, AZ
30. Transition Greater New Haven, Greater New Haven, CT
31. Transition Town Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA
32. Stelle Transition Initiative, Stelle, IL
33. Hancock County Towns in Transition, Ellsworth, ME
34. Hardwick Area Transition Towns, Hardwick Area, VT
35. Transition Whidbey, Southern Whidbey Island, WA
36. Transition Culver City, Culver City, CA
37. Transition Sunnyside, Sunnyside Portland, OR
38. Transition Media, Media, PA
39. Transition Carrboro/Chapel Hill, Carrboro/Chapel Hill, NC
40. Transition Houston, Houston, TX
41. Transition Olympia, Olympia, WA
42. Transition Town Chelsea, Chelsea, MI
43. Transition Anderson, Anderson, OH
44. Transition Austin, Austin, TX
45. Sustainable Monterey County, Monterey, CA
46. Transition Northfield, Northfield, MN
47. Transition Louisville, Louisville, KY
48. Transition Shelburne, Shelburne, VT
49. Transition Van Buren-Allegan, Fennville, MI
50. Transition Reno, Reno, NV
51. Transition Town Manchester, Manchester, VT
52. Hay River Transition Initiative, HRTI Prairie Farm, WI
53. Transition Westminster/Arvada/Broomfield, Westminster, CO
54. Transition Bloomington, Bloomington, IN
55. Transition San Francisco, San Francisco, CA
56. Transition Keene, Keene, NH
57. Richmond Rivets, Richmond, CA
58. Transition PGH, Pittsburgh, PA
59. Transition Albany, Albany, CA
60. Transition Micanopy, Micanopy, FL
61. Transition Staunton Augusta, Staunton, VA
62. Transition Town Putney, Putney, VT
63. Transition Towns State College, State College, PA
64. Transition Town Bald Eagle Valley, Julian, PA
65. Transition Nevada County, Nevada City, CA
66. Transition Montague, Montague, MA
67. Transition Silicon Valley, Mountain View, CA
68. Transition San Fernando Valley, North Hills, CA
69. Transition San Lorenzo Valley, Ben Lomond, CA
70. Transition Town Charlotte (VT), Charlotte, VT
71. Transition Northfield (MA), Northfield, MA
72. Pelham Transition, Pelham, MA
73. Transition Madison Area, Madison, WI
74. Transition Northampton, Northampton, MA
75. Transition Sewickley, Sewickley, PA
76. Transition Palo Alto, Palo Alto, CA
77. Transition Newton, Newton, NJ
78. Transition Cheltenham, Cheltenham, PA
79. Transition Fidalgo & Friends, Anacortes, WA
80. Transition Traverse City, Traverse City, MI
81. Transition Vashon, Vashon, WA
82. Transition Sonoma Valley, Sonoma, CA
83. Transition Chicago, Chicago, IL
84. Transition Rogers Park, Rogers Park, IL
85. Transition South Dakota (SE), Sioux Falls, SD
86. Greetings Greenfield Energy Committee, Greenfield, MA
87. Somerville Climate Action, Somerville, MA
88. Transition Asheville, Asheville, NC
89. Transition Centreville-Clifton, Centreville, VA
90. Transition Snoqualmie Valley, Carnation, WA
91. Revive the Roots, Smithfield, RI
92. Transition Muskegon County, Muskegon, MI
93. Transition Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI
94. Chuckanut Transition, Chuckanut, WA
95. Jamaica Plain New Economy Transition, Jamaica Plain, MA
96. Transition Joshua Tree, Joshua Tree, CA
97. Transitions Lehigh Valley – PA, Bethlehem, PA
98. Transition Omaha, Omaha, NE
99. Sustainable Fairfax, Fairfax, CA
100. Transition Kaw Valley, Lawrence, KS
101. Transition Port Gardner, Everett, WA
102. Transition Amherst, Amherst, MA
103. Transition Woodinville, Woodinville, WA
104. Corcoran GROWS (Minneapolis, MN), Minneapolis, MN
105. Transition Sarasota, Sarasota, FL
106. Transition Westchester (NY), Ossining, NY
107. Transition Tulsa, Tulsa, OK
108. Transition Marbletown, Stone Ridge, NY
Appendix B: Call for Participants

Dear ______,

I am a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill completing a master’s thesis about how transition town initiatives create and share information. In particular, I am interested in understanding how initiative websites promote knowledge sharing, and how online practices may differ from those employed in real world settings. The [TOWN NAME HERE] transition initiative appears to be particularly active and I was wondering if you might be willing to answer some questions about the organization via e-mail. If talking by phone would be more convenient, I would be happy to set up a time to connect.

The questionnaire includes 13 questions, and should take 20-40 minutes to complete. Your participation is completely voluntary. Because I have chosen to approach your group specifically, the names of the initiative and any members I speak with will be included in my thesis, which will be available online and in print through the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill library system. If you would like to answer the questions via e-mail, you can find them pasted below this message and can reply to me directly at mveitch@live.unc.edu.

If you choose to participate, I will send you a digital copy of my final thesis. Transcripts of the original interviews or correspondence will be kept on my laptop and destroyed six months after my thesis is approved.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this request. If you have any further questions, don’t hesitate to contact me at (845) 594-9821 or my advisor Paul Jones at (919) 360-7740.

Kind Regards,
Madeline Veitch
Candidate for MSLS 2012
UNC Chapel Hill
Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about how your transition initiative developed - when did it start? How many people were involved at the outset? How many are involved now?

2. What kinds of projects have the initiative created or been involved with?

3. How closely does your group adhere to Rob Hopkins’ model, and in what ways have you personalized the framework?

4. How many people were involved in creating the website? How many people maintain it or add content?

5. Can you comment on the importance of the following web-features for your initiative? Interactive features (forums or social media)? Informative materials (articles, bibliographies)? Organizational elements (calendar, events posting)? Are you happy with what your web platform has to offer in terms of features? Are there other features you would like?

6. Do you have a physical office space, or other spaces in the community that the initiative was involved in creating (e.g. gardens)? If so, how are they used?

7. Does the initiative use other community spaces like the town hall, community center, or library?

8. What does the organizational structure look like – do you have a core committee? What proportion of folks involved with the initiative (both core and beyond) create “content” of some kind (e.g. teach workshops, write articles, post heavily on forums)?

9. Roughly what percentage of folks who become involved or attend events do you think find out about the initiative online as opposed to through word of mouth, print media, or other offline venues?

10. Is there anything you have intentionally decided not to put on the website? Why?

11. If you lost your website tomorrow, what would be most affected? Are there things the initiative does that would be unaffected by a loss of web presence?

12. In terms of diversity, do you feel your group has attracted folks from a cross-section of incomes? Do you think web access is a factor in participation?

13. To what extent does the initiative operate at a purely local level, and how does it engage with more “global” issues such as international or national climate change policy?