

**Environmental Nonprofit Organizations and Networked Publics:  
Case Studies of Water Sustainability**

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Globalization has heralded the emergence of “networked publics”—stakeholders who span both local geographies and global media spaces—that large nonprofit organizations (NPOs) and for-profit corporations alike must pay heed to in order to be successful (boyd, 2011; Ito, 2008; Pal & Dutta, 2008a; Sedereviciute & Valentinia, 2011; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas 2009). Such stakeholder networks, connecting the local and global, are crucial for organizations centered on environmental sustainability, given that issues of climate change, resource conversation, and pollution (among others) are far-reaching in impact and scope. Environmental NPOs must build and sustain global structures, connections, and processes, but they also need to seek out and work with entities in particular localities for different projects (Hopke, 2016; Mitra, 2013; Sun, DeLuca, & Seegert, 2015). This chapter thus draws on two case studies to examine how environmental NPOs negotiate complex local/global flows critical to their work.

Specifically, I compare the global/local outreach, deliberation, and mobilization efforts of two environmental nonprofit organizations based in the United States, and focused on water sustainability. Case 1 is the North American arm of a multi-stakeholder initiative concerned with establishing norms and guidelines for global water stewardship (“Aqua”); case 2 is a well-connected watershed use and water technology nonprofit (“WaterNet”), located in the Great Lakes region. By selecting NPOs concerned with the sustainable management of water resources, this chapter continues the recent spotlight of interdisciplinary research on the complications afforded by the simultaneous scarcity and abundance of water in the natural environment (e.g., Druschke, 2013; Sprain, Carcasson, & Merolla, 2014). Moreover, these cases

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exemplify the complex intersection of local places and global spaces that contemporary NPOs must navigate, given the ubiquity of water resources for human life, coupled with context-specific institutional ties and discursive formations guiding social behaviors related to water consumption. While Aqua and WaterNet are both concerned with water sustainability, they have very different functions and stakeholder outreach activities (i.e., deliberation of water use standards, and networking to encourage socioeconomic investment in water, respectively). Thus, they provide a useful comparison and contrast to consider how water-focused NPOs must communicatively negotiate local/global contexts and practices.

My analysis draws from research on networked publics, organizational studies, and environmental communication. Of particular interest is how water-themed NPOs like Aqua and WaterNet seek to connect local, site-specific publics through discourse in the global space of water sustainability activism, to accomplish the nonprofits' goals of global conservation. I argue that the two cases indicate a complex process of stakeholder engagement of networked publics, which emphasizes both grassroots, place-based collaboration and the global management of common resources. This local/global dialectic highlights how such discursive formations are simultaneously competing and reinforce each other, helping the NPOs engage publics with different underlying motives (e.g., activists, corporations, governments). A second crucial dialectic is evident, in that corporate interests and capitalist principles of administering resources are often privileged in the NPOs' discourse, even as they also seek to empower local communities and activists, and emphasize common interests, crises and opportunities that seemingly transcend capitalist valuation of resources. Rather than consider these dialectics in overly puritan tones of black-and-white and hasten to condemn the NPO's "hypocrisy," a pragmatic tone of analysis that recognizes the polyphony of organizational discourse, especially

on complex issues such as environmental sustainability, might be in order (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2015).

In the remainder of this chapter, I first discuss the notion of networked publics that span both local places and global spaces, with particular focus on the implications for sustainable organizing movements and nonprofit organizations. Then, I outline the two case backgrounds and describe my methods of data collection. Finally, I use examples from the two water-themed NPOs to illustrate their processes of global outreach, deliberation and grassroots mobilization.

## **Literature Review**

### **Networked Publics**

The ongoing interconnection of technologies, people, information, and places worldwide has given rise to what is often termed the “network economy” or “network culture” of the present era. Scholars such as Manuel Castells (2010) have argued that network economies connect core nodes in ever-denser ties, enhancing the centrality of such nodes further, while simultaneously highlighting the role of peripheral locations, technologies and actors that support this intricate web of ties. Studies of local/global networks have been interdisciplinary in scope, ranging from a focus on the material linkages that connect actors with resources (e.g., roads, telecom fiber and other physical infrastructure for transferring capital, labor, and various raw inputs for industrialization) to the informational ties that constitute and reify imagined communities that were once isolated (e.g., global broadcast of ethnic media, teleconferencing across organizational actors and stakeholders) (Appadurai, 1996; Baym et al., 2012; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Diani, 1992; Parks, 2011; Varnelis, 2008). Of overarching concern in such studies is how the interconnection of people, capital, material, and information has shaped how we see ourselves as individuals and as communities, in both the local context and broader global sense. Accordingly,

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Ito (2008) introduced the term “networked publics” to describe the “linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media” (p. 2).

Building on this definition, boyd (2011) argued that, “Networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (p. 39). This (re)definition of “networked publics” is in line with boyd’s roots as a communication scholar, to focus on the underlying implications of network structures for stakeholder interaction, community building, and issue deliberation (see also boyd & Ellison, 2007). For the purposes of this chapter, it highlights two key aspects of networked publics—the continual contestation of the “imagined collective” (across space and time) to frame meaning, and the construction of particular global spaces or “niches” that exist seemingly apart from local places rooted in geography but are nevertheless dependent on such places for meaning-making. At stake, then, is more than just the connection of territories and communities via mediated tools (e.g., global conglomerations like Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation), but recognizing that networked publics exist both because of and in spite of globalization. That is, networked publics are shaped by mediated tools, but also by the broader socioeconomic systems that shape these tools in the first place (e.g., capitalism), even as they also generate resources, connections, and societal systems that contest their legitimacy (e.g., Indymedia connecting grassroots communities that emphasize “globalization from below”) (Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005).

The first aspect of relevance—namely, the *contested* creation of imagined networked publics—is in line with work by Nancy Fraser (1990), Michael Warner (2002), and others, who

recognize that even as vast swathes of the population might constitute a public sphere for the deliberation of policy and practice, there always exist undercurrents and niche publics that represent alternative (usually marginalized) interests. These counterpublics might be strengthened by the networked world economy and information system, which allows previously isolated groups and nodes to (re)connect with likeminded allies, and thus pose an effective challenge to mainstream hegemony (Self, 2010). For instance, Mitra and Gajjala (2010) explored networked agency in seemingly far-flung publics of queer South Asian bloggers, which allowed them to not only recover a form of lost collective agency, despite their geographical isolation, but also reconstitute themselves as networked (counter)publics capable of challenging heteronormative and often homophobic depictions of queerness.

The second aspect of relevance pertains to boyd's (2011) recognition that networked publics co-create specific spaces of operation that connect, yet exist seemingly apart from, the material places wherein they are themselves located. Scholars of contemporary social movements and activist organizations have especially noted this "in-betweenness" of global activism, whereby previously far-flung and isolated activists actively construct and reify a global space for their joint operations, to express solidarity, exchange resources and information, and even form a gathering-house for potential recruits (Bennett, 2003; Diani, 1992; Varnelis & Friedberg, 2008). Empirical examples abound, ranging from the widespread connections enabled by network technologies to Indymedia's collaboration and organization efforts during the Seattle WTO protests (Pickard, 2006), to the more mundane, ongoing efforts of activists across the U.S. and Mexico to support the Zapatista movement (Atkinson, 2009). Critical scholars articulate cautious optimism, noting that even as such co-constitution of global space to voice dissent allows activists to find new direction for the social movement, opening up this space to newer

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actors who might not be as invested in the social justice component also brings with it the possibility of cooptation (Pal & Dutta, 2008a, 2008b). That is, engendering global spaces of operation for networked publics might also result in an ongoing tussle with more powerful forces of the status quo that seek to destabilize these fledgling spaces, and even negate the validity of lived experiences emanating from geographically-rooted places precisely because they remain disparate and marginalized.

### **Nonprofit Organization Networks**

Operating in a hyper-mediated network society has both risks and benefits for organizations, whether they are corporate or nonprofit. On the hand, it is much harder for organizations to control their preferred identity, image, and discourses owing to the fragmented online media environment (Bennett, 2003; Gilpin, 2010; Walton, Cooley, & Nicholson, 2012). On the other hand, these connections across various networked publics also offer organizations advantages of scale, pace and audience depth, which can be useful in situations like crisis communication (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011) or even for everyday stakeholder engagement (Waters et al., 2009). Organizational communication scholars have traced the import of networked technologies and publics in two broad ways—first, in terms of the impact of social media and networks on everyday organizational practices, paying attention to both the objective and subjective characteristics of media technologies (e.g., Treem & Leonardi, 2012); and second, conceptualizing organizations themselves as networked publics, so that the goal of management becomes to coordinate emergent and institutionalized knowledge networks (e.g., Contractor & Monge, 2002; Xia et al., 2009). This latter stream of research is particularly relevant for this chapter, especially scholarship focusing on NPOs and community engagement.

Scholars of social networks have identified several key aspects of NPO organizing in the contemporary network society. For instance, Vaast (2004) argued that the use of intranet technologies allowed local communities to form stronger bonds with remote members, and realize operational efficiencies, so that they reorganized as “networks of practice.” Looking at the precise context of international NPOs active in the social justice arena, Stohl and Stohl (2005) theorized that such entities fulfil key “structural holes” that are left vacant in the global institutional system, owing to lack of policy or political will. In doing so, such nonprofits strengthen their own role within the global network, but also reinforce the network itself and individual nation-states. More recently, Cooper and Shumate (2012) drew on the concept of “bona fide groups” to conceptualize a bona fide network perspective to interorganizational collaboration, rooting it in the intricate network of gender-based violence NPOs in Zambia. They asserted that membership in such networks were fuzzy and dynamic, rather than concrete and fixed in time; the localized structural environment shaped particular configurations of interorganizational collaboration while restraining others; different, multiplex ties were evident among NPOs in the network; and the collaborative outcomes shaped both individual NPOs and the broader network profoundly. Moreover, O’Connor and Shumate (2014) examined how nonprofits and their corporate partners were arranged in particular networks, with varying degrees of closeness and centrality, depending on the issues both parties held salient—arguing for a long-term model of “symbiotic sustainability” (see also Shumate & O’Connor, 2010). It then becomes useful to trace how such networked organizing practices shape NPOs in the environmental sustainability space.

### **Sustainable Organizing and NPO Networks**

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Sustainable development is commonly taken to be development that meets our present economic and social needs, without impinging on the needs and prosperity of future generations—what is commonly referred to as the “Brundtland definition” (World Council for Economic Development, 1987). While sustainable organizing has long constituted an interdisciplinary area of research, organizational and environmental communication scholars focus on the role of message production, interpretation, and coordination in shaping social and institutional practices toward more sustainable actions (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2015). A recent review suggests that organizational communication scholars have focused on four broad aspects of sustainability—long-term organizational viability, environmental corporate social responsibility, corporate communication on environmental impacts, and the resilience of complex adaptive systems (Mitra, In press). The actions of NPOs centered on environmental sustainability—especially in global interorganizational networks—is thus underexplored, despite their growing prominence.

Nevertheless, we may piece together some key communicative practices of environmental NPOs, which have to negotiate complex local and global flows of capital, stakeholders, and ecologies. Key among these practices are the constitution, framing, and coordination of messages related to environmental resources for various audiences, which are often intertwined processes. For instance, deliberating what sustainability means for different resources and local contexts, and how such guidelines may be applied for global monitoring, is a central concern for environmental nonprofits. Sun et al. (2015) traced the challenge for different environmental organizations in Utah (USA) to coordinate together, taking advantage of the cohesive social network ties that bound them together, but also having to cut out the “noise” and clamor that accompanied these dense networks. Similarly, Hopke (2016) examined the structure

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and communication content of translocal anti-fracking activist organizations, that allowed networked publics to emerge and resist mainstream frames, which characterized hydraulic fracturing (or fracking) as entirely unproblematic.

The characterization of sustainability and environmental resource management as a “civic science” (Bäckstrand, 2003) blends the deliberative and outreach processes at hand, while reframing the role of scientific experts, policymakers, nonprofits and regular citizens in these processes. Thus, rather than seek to “talk down” to communities via experts, environmental NPOs must engage them from the start of the planning and advocacy process, and reach out to various actors throughout the implementation of sustainability programs. Mitra (2013) used a critical dialogic perspective to examine how prominent activist group 350.org mobilized its local/global network to protest the Keystone XL pipeline project in the U.S. and organize its “Connect the Dots” campaign to raise awareness about climate change. Specifically, 350.org and its network of activists co-negotiated naming particular identities (e.g., grassroots activist versus elite policymaker), processes (e.g., gradual versus ongoing climate change) and concepts (e.g., scientific versus experiential evidence), and shifted across these tensional poles to be most effective at environmental activism.

In the next section, I present two case studies of environmental NPOs centered on the sustainable management of water resources that must negotiate both local place-based meanings and global spatial flows.

### **Case Studies of Local/Global Negotiation by Water-Themed NPOs**

Case studies have long been used to examine the deeper particularities of social and organizational practices. Stake (2000) notes that case studies may be both representative of broader trends and/or highlight unique situations and oddities that de-limit general rules; in either

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role, they are crucial to theory building and application. Organizational communication scholars like May (2012) argue that case studies allow for a grounded examination of the communicative practices and structures that constitute organizational reality. They permit us to consider actual challenges and contingencies facing organizations—which may not be revealed through other methods, such as experimental research, surveys, or interviews with practitioners from different contexts. Importantly, a case study may involve different modes of data collection, such as participant observation, interviewing, surveys, or document analysis (Stake, 2006).

Accordingly, this multi-case study examines how two environmental NPOs, both centered on sustainable management of water, negotiate the ongoing local and global complexities related to their work. As Stake (2006) notes, multi-case studies are concerned with the “quintain,” or “object or phenomenon to be studied... [with an eye toward] what is similar and what is different about the cases in order to understand the quintain better” (p. 6)—here: the negotiation of local/global issues and actors by environmental nonprofit organizations. Thus, it is through both a careful deconstruction of case particularities and a reconstruction of the quintain that a suitably nuanced picture emerges. In this instance, a focus on water-themed NPOs is particularly relevant to the communicative negotiation of local/global issues by environmental nonprofits. Although water remains bountiful in the natural world (i.e., covering about 71% of the earth’s surface), the access to and availability of freshwater remains scarce, and closely tied with social and environmental justice issues. Moreover, conditions of drought, floods, water pollution, and other crises have been cause for significant human suffering and dispute in the world. Sprain et al. (2014) thus highlight the importance of communicative design, both in shaping public deliberations on water management and in enabling ongoing engagement with communities and institutions for sustenance. Meanwhile, Druschke (2013) points out that

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community conceptualizations of water and watershed areas are closely linked to local discourses, despite their global ramifications, so that discussions of how water-themed NPOs address issues of water management must necessarily consider glocal issues—in keeping with our previous discussion of networked publics.

Below, I consider both case studies one by one. Pseudonyms—“Aqua” and “WaterNet”—have been used to protect identities of all individuals interviewed. Data for the Aqua case study is drawn from participant observations of several stakeholder meetings over 2011-2012, and thematic analysis of the organizations’ white papers, website, and publicly available research reports (including comments by stakeholders). Audio recordings of the stakeholder meetings was made available, and subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis. The data for the Aqua case amounted to around 100 pages, in roughly 12 size font. For the WaterNet case study, data was culled from interviews with the organization’s staff and several partners, white papers and research reports produced by the organization, and participant observations at its annual two-day conference. Select addresses and speeches at the Conference were audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis, brochures and pamphlets produced by both WaterNet and its partners were also collected for analysis, and photographs were taken of the public proceedings (including research and commercial posters by WaterNet’s partners). The data for the WaterNet case study amounted to roughly 150 pages. Although qualitative research methods, and the case study approach in particular, do not lay claims to either generalizability or exhaustive samples (May, 2012; Stake, 2000), the data corpus is thus of sufficient size and complexity to warrant theorizing on the communicative strategies enacted by both water-themed NPOs to engage their networked publics across local/global contexts.

### **Case 1: “Aqua”**

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Aqua defines itself as “a multi-stakeholder initiative whose mission is to promote responsible use of fresh water that is socially beneficial, environmentally responsible and economically sustainable.” This is, in fact, the first line of introduction in the report of its North America Regional Initiative (NARI) Report’s first public meeting, held late October, 2011. The NPO is a truly international organization, set up as a multi-stakeholder initiative originally by a gathering of high-profile well-connected nonprofits, and acquiring over time the recognition from both national governments and powerful corporations to work closely with activist groups, NPOs and local communities to help negotiate thorny issues related to water management. In this case study, I examine how Aqua negotiated the complexities of local/global contexts, as it sought to draft a global Water Stewardship Standard (WSS) with multiple stakeholders. The WSS itself was described as: “an international, ISEAL-compliant, standard that defines a set of water stewardship principles, criteria, and indicators for how water should be stewarded at a site and watershed level in a way that is environmentally, socially, and economically beneficial.” From the start, it was evident that Aqua’s toughest challenge (both in NARI and other regions) was coordinating with diverse stakeholders, with various interests, and deliberating a meaningful WSS—even as this diverse stakeholder base was also its main indicator of legitimacy.

**Globally networked deliberation.** NARI organized its first stakeholder meeting, with representatives from industry, nonprofits, universities, and government agencies, at a mid-sized U.S. city in the Midwest in late October 2011, to solicit feedback for the first draft of its WSS, which was available online. Following this meeting, a report was published on the Aqua website. Aqua also joined with various nonprofits to organize online webinars so that stakeholders who could not travel to specific locations might be able to offer feedback; I attended two such webinars during April 2012, organized with the noted sustainable business networking group

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2degrees. Also in April 2012, NARI organized a public meeting with various stakeholders at a large Canadian city; another public meeting was organized at a large city on the U.S. east coast, which I attended remotely. In May 2012, NARI joined with a team of the U.S. Federal Advisory Committee on Water Information to organize a roundtable, also on the U.S. east coast. After each of these meetings, reports were published online based on stakeholder inputs. Aqua also enabled an online survey for stakeholders to post feedback on the WSS, which was active till mid-June 2012. Moreover, NARI and representatives from some other Aqua cells organized a panel session at a prominent water sustainability conference in the U.S. Midwest, in October 2012. By the next month, the WSS drafting committee (DC) issued a detailed response, with changes made to the first draft, stakeholders' comments, and specifying the changes accomplished. Thereafter, the beta version of the WSS was released in early March 2013, and made available for public review online through the end of 2013. This release signaled the end of Phase I centered on public meetings, and the onset of Phase II, so that the WSS was being tested at different water sites across the world to refine its viability.

**Grassroots outreach and collaboration.** Of the various rhetorical themes emphasized by the deliberative processes surrounding the WSS, perhaps most prominent was the focus on “ground up” growth and local organizing. In line with the characterization of sustainability as a “civic science” (Bäckstrand, 2003), links and ties with various for-profit, nonprofit, and governmental organizations are stressed (including WaterNet, discussed below), both in terms of gaining strategic inputs for fine-tuning the WSS and for actually implementing the standard. The public meetings are designed to facilitate dialogue with various actors: going beyond “the room” or circle of stakeholders physically present at a particular venue, soliciting “public comment” in nonthreatening ways (e.g., having smaller group breakout sessions on particular topics during the

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offline meetings), providing reports (in languages other than English as well) to all attendees and then making these freely available online. Each meeting report starts by acknowledging the support of strategic partners, and ends with a two-page list of all the represented organizations attending. During the webinars, the Aqua Chairman would emphasize the 15-member constitution of the WSS DC, taking care to emphasize their membership in various organizations and citizenship in different countries, so that they act as “funnels” for distilling inputs from yet other, broadly located global stakeholders. These conditions were not synchronous (e.g., during the webinars, usually the Chair would describe the process till date for about 30 minutes, after which he would answer questions submitted by stakeholders during his talk), and depended on issues of technological access (e.g., high speed web connections and computer infrastructure), but they did attempt to reach out to the general public nevertheless.

**Dialogic communication—centering place.** By stressing repeatedly, in various forums, that “water is a shared resource,” with both “shared risks” and “shared opportunities,” Aqua justified a dialogic mode of deliberation. In the very first NARI meeting, Aqua detailed over an entire page the “value” of the WSS to various stakeholders (including other NPOs, the government, academia, local communities, specific companies, and particular sectors). Throughout its reports, white papers, and public meetings, this theme of regional *place-based* and bottom-up application was emphasized. Even as Aqua states being committed to “dialogue with local neighbors” of particular water areas (both smaller farmers and larger organizations) so that “collective action” can be taken, its stakeholders continually pushed the NPO for a clear recognition that localized sector-specific considerations (like agriculture, manufacturing, and the beverage industry) would be taken into account, repeatedly bringing up the importance of third-party verifiers for these specific locations. Accounts of ongoing and future field trials in different

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parts of the world were centered; while these are repeatedly mentioned in the public meetings and webinars, representatives from collaborators in Latin America and Australia were on hand at the October 2012 conference to detail these ground-up growth processes.

**Contesting spatial concepts.** Crucially, the deliberations at Aqua indicate an ongoing process of contesting, and re-naming in some instances, concepts and terms adopted by the WSS. Whereas the WSS' initially drew on the language of global institutions, like the United Nations or World Trade Organization, this terminology also emphasized spatial generalizability over place-based specificity—which was vocally rejected by Aqua's stakeholders. For instance, stakeholder complaints pushed the DC to re-name “areas of influence,” borrowed from the U.N. Global Compact, to “spheres of influence,” with separate recognition for hydrological and socio-cultural impacts, leading to a much more nuanced understanding of water stewardship. The DC also refined its definition of “water stewardship,” following stakeholder observations that it focused too much on resource management, and not enough on public accountability or long-term health of the watershed system. Stakeholders further pointed out that “important water areas” had different territorial meanings in different languages, prompting the DC to revise it to “important water-related areas.”

Finally, the deliberation process involved the semantic networking of existing categories and actors—for instance, with stakeholders pushing for clarification on how the WSS would define “indigenous people” (i.e., if it would link to the Global Compact definition, or articulate an alternative based on local communities' self-concepts), how the WSS would apply in different nations and draw on these various national standards (even as stakeholders called for rigorous baseline “implementation guidelines” for different regions and sectors regardless of these national standards), and calling for linking the WSS to future standards on “promoter”

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guidelines, pharmaceutical effluents, and so on. Aqua's stakeholders also had much to say on the avowed scope of the WSS; even as they emphasized the importance of local/regional/sectoral issues, they pushed for the centering of "impact" and "action," rather than just "process" or "effort" on the part of governments and corporations. Thus, they called for a tighter definition of "indirect water use," and more clarification on related supply chain issues, so that a "meaningfully relevant" standard could be drafted across local contexts for global sustainability.

### **Case 2: "WaterNet"**

WaterNet is a U.S. based nonprofit, headquartered in the Great Lakes region, with a mission to connect corporations, higher education, nonprofits, and government agencies to capitalize on "the business of water" (from its website). Its climb to prominence was the stuff NPO fairy tales are made of, from its humble beginnings as an underfunded water conservancy nonprofit, to eventually cultivating strong bipartisan ties with policymakers and close connections with both large and small regional companies. The NPO's home base had once been at the vanguard of American manufacturing, since relegated to a second-tier Rust Belt city, and WaterNet used this narrative history to effectively frame investment in water stewardship technologies as the panacea for rejuvenating the area. This case study draws from interviews with WaterNet staff, clients, and partners, as well as textual analysis of promotional material (e.g., brochures, pamphlets, newsletters), and participant observation at its two-day annual conference, to illustrate how the organization negotiates its local roots and global ambitions.

**Grassroots entrepreneurship.** As a nonprofit organization with the avowed goal to "convening the region's existing water companies and research clusters, developing education programs to train our talent, and building partnerships that cut across all sectors and geographic boundaries" (Website), WaterNet repeatedly highlights the entrepreneurial spirit of water and its

member organizations. For instance, its President described his own work building the organization and its network as entrepreneurial: “I almost look at myself as an entrepreneur, not in the traditional sense of a for-profit business, but it doesn’t matter whether it’s for-profit or not-for-profit, you’re starting up a brand new organization, and with that, you literally have to do everything just like any entrepreneur.” In retelling this “origin story” of WaterNet to prospective clients and partners, he highlighted the power of grassroots entrepreneurship for sustainability. Describing a recent (successful) meeting with a representative of a large department store chain, WaterNet’s Director of Communications and Membership noted,

We sat down for half-an-hour, 45 minutes, and Aaron [the President] told her the story of the inception of WaterNet and how we kind of uncovered this water cluster that’s always sort of existed here, but nobody really knew about it – then discovered that, yes, it could be a big economic driver, and there’s lots of opportunities for partnerships and using that sort of pool of knowledge to help everyone succeed. And as I was watching the situation unfold, I could see this gal just starting to get really excited about it, and her whole face kind of changed, and she’s nodding along with what Aaron is saying and really kind of – taking the bait isn’t really what I want to say [LAUGHTER] but –

Thus, in positioning both itself and water stewardship in terms of discovering new economic opportunities, WaterNet sought to achieve strategic buy-in and legitimacy from stakeholders that traditionally favor free market enterprise and profit maximization over other discourses.

**Glocal research and development.** WaterNet and its stakeholders noted the importance of research and development (R&D) in its everyday work, which they were careful to frame both in terms of local placement and generating local opportunities, and shaping global policy on resource management. This was especially evident in the discourse surrounding its newly

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constructed Global Water Center in its home city, meant to act as an accelerator program for research and commercialization initiatives. During the conference, the Center was described as the “embodiment” of WaterNet’s goals, “merging the entrepreneurial spirit and large backing, to enable [Home City] to compete with other cities.” In its newsletter, WaterNet expected the Center to “provide resources and expertise that are not presently available anywhere else in the world.” The NPO emphasized how the Center and members’ research initiatives would develop local talent and expertise among workers for the fledgling water industry, so that linkages with institutions of higher education were particularly strategic. Headline speakers at the conference also described their engaged learning and research projects in faraway locations, such as India, Africa, and China, to emphasize reaching out to youth and the next generation of STEM workers through internships, grants, and study opportunities. The CEO of one member organization noted that it was crucial to deal with the existing talent shortage, both locally and globally, and educate students about the high wages possible in green jobs related to water technologies. Another partner noted:

Our mission is to unlock the potential of people. So, it doesn’t matter what stage you are in your career – whether you’re a student or whether you’re mid-stage or later stage or a boomer who’s retired and trying to find the next big thing for yourself – the worst thing on the planet is wasted talent, and part of the problem there is just connecting people with [their talents], raising awareness that there’s opportunities for talent, and then helping people identify with the things that they’re really passionate about and capable of.

Another member spoke about talent development in terms of building a “water machine” that connected water, energy, and health holistically.

**Place-based branding.** The theme of branding, especially related to place, was center-stage in WaterNet’s discourse. At the conference, staff members were handing out free mugs with the WaterNet logo, which is a stylized depiction of the first letter of [Home City]. The organization has a deep connection with its home city, and although it was “going global” with several new projects underway (e.g., the Global Water Center), the organization engaged in deep reflexion to abide by this connection. Its President noted:

We will continue with great pride to talk about the fact that we are from [Home City], and even when we start putting our things out there – and our logo, as an example, where – if you look at it, it looks like a wave, but more importantly, it looks like an [X], and when we were going through the original design of it, we thought early on what happens if we expand and grow beyond the seven counties, and do we simply flip that around and take on a [X] for something [else] like that, and when we were going through that effort this summer, I really looked at it, and I said, no we need to keep that just as it is, and it really is that tie back to our headquarters and our base being here in [Home City], and that’s important to us, because one of the things that is key is economic development within this region.

For WaterNet, this place-based branding helped cultivate close ties with local universities and policymakers, as when the Mayor of the city (present at the conference) renamed a major thoroughfare to reflect the region’s increased focus on water stewardship, or when local universities converged to open extension centers and research offices at the new Global Water Center. Local connections were also emphasized elsewhere, with other international research and service sites, so as to create a global network of local water clusters.

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**Connector across networks.** Finally, networking was omnipresent in WaterNet’s discourse, as both a micro-level practice and macro-level organizing metaphor. The NPO’s President emphasized, “We’re *connectors*. We’re the ones that are out there being able to know all the various different players whether they be in industry or academia or utilities, whether they be in Milwaukee or in Chicago or Singapore or Beijing or Paris, and our job is to be able to connect people who’ve got ideas with those who are looking for answers.” This self-identification as “connectors” recalls Stohl and Stohl’s (2005) recognition of how international NPOs serve as valuable nodes filling structural holes, to facilitate institutional action related to water management.

Making these connections was, in fact, crucial for each of WaterNet’s three key concerns of economic development, talent development, and technology development—a stance that is shared and widely supported by its members. For instance, one conference participant said he was impressed by WaterNet’s ability to partner with disparate actors, share know-how around the latest technologies, gain new insight into resource management issues related to water, and how to better frame water sustainability issues for investors. This positive impression translated into a commitment to join the multi-stakeholder initiative that WaterNet was convening in the Great Lakes region, as a permanent member and sponsor. As noted earlier, corporate, government and higher education partners lined up to connect with each other, with aspirations to create a pipeline of highly skilled workers and managers, from the universities to policymaking and industry, with WaterNet filling the structural hole at the hub to connect these different entities. The NPO also liberally used networking terms, such as describing its home city as the “hub” of a new “water economy,” or when different conference speakers tied their localized work in various parts of the world back to WaterNet’s activities, thereby further

burnishing its local and global reputation as a “connector.” Rather than a global network restricted by the boundaries of a single city (however much it emphasized place-based branding), WaterNet advocated the formation of connected clusters or, as one conference speaker put it, “smart networks” for diverse regions and stakeholders. These smart networks were designed to be “transitioning systems as societies morphed from highly centralized formations to less,” and utilized principles of “flexible, adaptive design” and systemic operations/resource management.

### **Discussion**

Networked publics offer special challenges and opportunities for environmental nonprofit organizations, which must engage local stakeholders by emphasizing place-based discourses but also highlight broader systemic connections at the global level. Negotiating these local/global dialectics for such NPOs, given the complex nature of environmental problems like climate change, pollution mitigation, and management of natural resources, which require concerted effort among diverse stakeholders impacting the eco-systems at stake. In this chapter, I used a multi-case study (Stake, 2006) of two water-themed NPOs—Aqua and WaterNet—to trace how these nonprofits negotiate local/global flows in their deliberation, stakeholder engagement, and audience outreach efforts. Findings indicate that Aqua prioritized globally networked deliberation processes (rather than purely local consultations), grassroots collaboration and outreach with local partners, dialogic communication that centered place, and contested spatial concepts to privilege local/place-based meanings. Meanwhile, WaterNet found it useful to elevate the virtues of grassroots entrepreneurship in its water management discourse, glocal R&D processes and facilities, place-based branding to help both itself and its partners, and saw itself as an invaluable connector across various institutional networks.

On the one hand, this chapter demonstrates that both NPOs found it necessary to identify as both local and global in scope, activities, and identity vis-à-vis their diverse stakeholders, despite the potential contradictions at stake. Recognizing that these stakeholders were neither isolated nor a homogenous bloc, but connected through multiplex ties—both strong and weak, tangible and intangible, material and informational—the NPOs found it prudent to discursively emphasize their position in key “structural holes” (Stohl & Stohl, 2005) that was able to mobilize both local action and global policymaking. Such seemingly paradoxical identity management allowed Aqua and WaterNet to generate and facilitate the transfer of creative ideas, meaningfully capture economies of scale as their networks grew larger and more webbed, and help produce mature and efficient networks of practice (rather than simply connecting disparate entities with media technologies) (e.g., Druschke, 2013; Hopke, 2016; Mitra, 2013). Positioning themselves vis-à-vis their networked publics thus involved much more than recognizing the mediated networks and technology webs at stake; it meant that both Aqua and WaterNet had to deftly manage their organizational discourse in ways that they were simultaneously connected to stakeholders with potentially competing interests, fulfilling their agendas and finding a way to articulate common concerns even when their interests were at odds with each other. Rather than a liability, straddling both local/global contexts became an immeasurable strategy for these NPOs to mobilize their networked publics on the issue of water management.

Nevertheless, these case studies would seem to uphold the concerns of critical scholars of globalization in that, even as Aqua and WaterNet emphasized ostensibly participatory discourses of deliberation and building grassroots connections, both NPOs played up neoliberal agendas of business development, entrepreneurship, and corporate growth that privileged efficient management of water resources (and potentially downplayed social justice). For instance, while

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Aqua's organizational discourse and stakeholder deliberations highlighted the concerns of indigenous people, they mostly focused on regulatory regimes and corporate promoters of water management. Meanwhile, WaterNet hardly ever concerned itself with issues related to water scarcity and/or access for marginalized communities, despite the lip service paid to connecting broad, networked publics, and tended to focus on the "blue economy" of water for entities that could afford to play by market rules.

Despite these concerns, scholars such as Christensen et al. (2013) argue that we ought to recognize and take heart from the polyphony of organizational discourse. That is, all discourse—even discourse seemingly generated by a single organization with little attempt at soliciting stakeholder participation—is fragmented and contains multiple voices, the voices of stakeholders that have percolated through broader social systems to shape the discourse at hand. Moreover, even as corporatist discourse would seem to uphold neoliberal values, they also serve to continually hold their producing organizations accountable for specific actions; as society evolves, its underlying values change accordingly, and so must the organizations at stake. Thus, as the meaning of "sustainable organizing" becomes more expansive over time, tensions are bound to occur between organizational actions and organizational discourse, and these tensions act in a productive capacity to further change organizational values and actions (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2015). This means that terms and concepts like "water stewardship" (Aqua) and "the capital of water" (WaterNet) are not static, and neither are the corporatist meanings that critics may see attached to them. Rather, they are bound to evolve, through ongoing deliberation and networking across glocal publics—instances of which are already apparent. That is, even as Aqua's conveners initially emphasized status quo institutionalized meanings for "water areas" or impacted communities, the case study demonstrated how networked publics resisted, insisting

both on localized interpretations of these concepts and on global baseline measures for greater accountability. Similarly, although WaterNet's discourse focused on water as a capital resource, it's local and global stakeholders sought to connect this resource to the richness of their lived experiences, systemic policymaking for better access to water, and rejuvenation of local regional structures. The case studies thus indicate a complex interplay of grassroots empowerment and institutional elites, which is hard to dismiss as overwhelmingly favoring one pole or the other.

To conclude this chapter, several directions may be suggested for future research on global communication in the case of environmental NPOs engaging with networked publics. First, researchers should consider the intersection of mainstream media and activist channels, as such nonprofits adopt both local/global and grassroots/elite strategies to push their agenda (Mitra, 2013). Second, as communication scholars, we ought to interrogate the underlying power relationships and tensions that often go unexplored in the agenda of environmental NPOs, without giving them a free pass on their credentials. Interrogation of these tensions is much more nuanced than simply asserting a corporatist bias in the contemporary operations of nonprofit organizations. Rather, we must draw on multiple methods and theoretical frameworks to explore the intersectionality of power/resistance, grassroots/elites, and change/stability as environmental NPOs engage various government, for-profit, and other nonprofit organizations across geographical locations (Ganesh et al., 2005).

Finally, even as global communication scholars have studied the mediated connections between places and spaces, they should pay attention to the organizing processes—both formal and informal—at stake, as nonprofit organizations (including, but not limited to, environmental NPOs) are actively engaged in “place-making” and place-branding, to draw attention both to their own activities and to the systemic implications of their partner networks.

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