Research Note: The Frequency of Third Sector Terms in English-language Books (Shown in 31 Ngrams)

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Research Note: The Frequency of Third Sector Terms in English-language Books (Shown in 31 Ngrams)

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Keywords in NGrams

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Introduction

Google’s Ngram is an interesting novelty but also a potentially important research tool that is already widely used in language studies. It determines the frequency of word use in the entire electronic collection of five million books in the Google library; an ill-fated project that has its own interesting and controversial history (Jones, 2011; Pechenick, et al., 2015). The Google Ngram data set begins with the rising frequency of published English-language books around 1500 and terminates, abruptly, with the successful legal challenges to this project in 2008. This document presents and comments on a variety of views of Ngrams constructed for terms in common use in third sector studies that were gathered while I familiarized myself with the use of this tool. These charts are presented in no particular order.

While the following searches make no allowance for multiple meanings of terms, the user can get a sense of the relative importance of certain terms over time by comparing them with other related terms and by looking at the usage percentages at left. Most of those percentages are miniscule fractions of one percent, as one might expect for a set of technical terms.

Initially, I did a comparison of two highly popular terms (of, if you prefer, buzzwords or jargon terms) at present – output and outcome. The first of these two technical terms, output, with no obvious non-technical connotations, first appeared in English-language books with any measurable frequency around 1880 and continued to grow in use until sometime in the 1980s but has been in declining use since then. It’s near-cognate, outcome, began to appear in books around 15 years earlier about the end of the U.S. Civil War and has experienced a lower (but continually rising) rate of increasing frequency of use ever since, as shown in Figure 1 below.
Figure 1. A Comparison of the Frequency of Output and Outcome
Freedom and Liberty

Another interesting comparison is between the pair of related terms freedom and liberty. As Figure 2 below shows, in 1800 liberty was used roughly three times more often but has continued to decline in usage since, falling below freedom in frequency of use around 1910. Freedom in turn shows an increase in use beginning around 1910 with a major upward blip from 1920-1940 and a decline in use in the 1970s.

Figure 2. A Comparison of the Frequency Freedom and Liberty, 1800-2000
Society and Civil Society

The third Ngram, shown in Figure 3, compares the terms society and civil society. By comparison with the more generic society, the qualified term civil society barely raises a blip on this graph. As we will see below, historical fluctuations in usage of the term civil society are much more important than the scale of this graph indicates.

Figure 3. A Comparison of Society and Civil Society, 1800-2000

If we shorten the time frame for this comparison (1940-2008), we can see this same relation in somewhat greater detail in Figure 4. Both graphs show quite clearly that the term civil society was rarely found in English language books before the decade 1990-2000 and even then its usage was dwarfed by the more conventional society.
Figure 4. Comparison of Society and Civil Society, 1940-2000

Graph these comma-separated phrases: society,civil society

between 1940 and 2008 from the corpus English with smoothing of 1

Search lists of books
Cooperation and Cooperative

Another pair of terms, cooperation and cooperative, show somewhat similar patterns of increased usage, with both coming into significantly increased usage after 1880, and declining in use in recent decades – in this case perhaps under the influence of neo-liberalism and the new individualism or perhaps suggesting the declining importance of cooperatives.

Figure 5. Comparison of Cooperation and Cooperative
Voluntary Association, Labor Union

Comparison of the pair of two-word terms, voluntary association and labor union reveals a kind of mini-cultural history of those two ideas: Interestingly, the term voluntary association appears to have been in use in English-language books well before Alexis de Tocqueville’s publications in the 1840s and has remained in relatively constant use ever since, falling slightly in usage during the 1920s, rising gradually to a peak in the 1970s and falling back to 1880 levels since. Labor union, on the other hand, is a virtual index of the U.S. labor movement, even though the Google collection includes all English language texts. Rising in use from 1880 to 1920, dipping significantly during the 1920s, then rising sharply to a peak usage roughly twice the 1930 level approximately the end of WWII in 1945, and declining back to roughly the 1930 level by 2000.

Figure 6. Comparison of Voluntary Association and Labor Union, 1800-2000
Organizations, associations, unions

Another interesting set of comparisons, shown in Figure 7, is that between use of the terms organization, association and union. In the Ngram search, each term was used in its plural form in an effort to screen out such unrelated usages as biology (e.g., the organization of cells), psychology, and mathematical set theory. Obviously, this won’t eliminate all unrelated usages, but even so comparison of the three terms shows the growth of the term organizations since its apparent debut in the 1840s. Interestingly, Figure 8 shows the impact of the introduction of key adjectives (formal organizations, voluntary associations, labor unions) is minimal.

Figure 7. Comparison of organizations, associations and unions
Formal Organizations, Voluntary Associations, Labor Unions

This configuration brings together in comparative perspective several trends some of which are noted in previous charts: The rise, dip, rise and long decline of the appearance of the term, labor unions; The long history of voluntary associations back at least to 1800 with gradual increases after 1940 and declines in the 1970s back to 1940s levels; and the rise of usage of formal organizations after 1940 to a peak around 1970 followed by some tailing off since then.

**Figure 8. Formal Organizations, Voluntary Associations and Labor Unions**
Volunteer, Philanthropy, Voluntary Association, Civil Society, Nonprofit, Volunteer and Nongovernmental

It is possible also in Ngram Viewer to look at simultaneous views of a larger number of terms compared in the same frequency scale, as in Figure 9 and, as the scroll down menus suggest, to change the time frames (e.g., 1940-2008 or 1500-1750), to examine books in selected other languages, to affect the smoothing of the trend lines, and to include or exclude capitalized or lower case terms only.

Figure 9. A Comparison of Seven Terms for Third Sector Phenomena

Shortening the time frame (1940-2008) together with less smoothing enables us to see these same connections in even greater detail in Figure 10. Note the dips in frequency of use for both nonprofit and civil society after 2005; a dip not indicated for philanthropy which also seems not to have experienced the dramatic growth in popularity among authors of civil society or the long upward slope of nonprofit after 1940.
Figure 10. A Comparison of Terms with Lower Smoothing, 1940-2008
Commons and Nonprofit

I was not prepared for what showed up in comparison of the pair commons and nonprofit. The graph shows a downward trend in use of the term commons after about 1810, with no apparent upward trend after 1980. With Ngram it is not possible to sort out or distinguish agricultural and land use commons from other usages, most notably the House of Commons. This probably influenced this data.

Figure 11. Comparison of Commons and Nonprofit

Shortening the time scale, however, to the period 1940-2008 as in Figure 12, shows a somewhat more complex picture, with usage of the term commons trending upward after 2000 and – as previously noted – nonprofit trending downward in usage.
Figure 12. Comparison of Commons and Nonprofit, 1940-2008
Commons, Commonwealth, Commonweal

At this point, I decided to look more closely into the term commons, comparing it with both commonwealth and commonweal. The chart below shows the previously noted more or less continuous decline of the term commons, while the term commonwealth displays a more or less continuous fluctuation of much lower frequency, and at this scale the term commonweal barely registers.

**Figure 13. Comparison of Commons, Commonwealth & Commonweal, 1800-2000**

Reducing the frame to the 1940-2008 time scale shows remarkably similar fluctuations in the two more frequently used terms until the upswing of usage of the term commons after 2000.
Figure 14. Commons, Commonwealth & Commonweal, 1940-2008
Nonprofit and Nongovernmental

In the early years of third sector studies several decades ago, many of those who disliked the term nonprofit sought various substitutes, including the term nongovernmental (differentiating the third sector from the state rather than from the market). This chart shows that both terms arose around the same time, but that nongovernmental never achieved the popularity of nonprofit but also does not appear to have experienced the post-2000 decline in usage. These trends are shown in Figures 14 and 15.

**Figure 14. Comparison of the Terms Nonprofit and Nongovernmental, 1800-2000**

What we also see in closer detail is that nongovernmental too has experienced a decline in usage since 2000.
Figure 15. Comparison of the Terms Nonprofit and Nongovernmental, 1940-2008
Civil Society and Nonprofit

When we compare the linguistic pair civil society and nonprofit in the two timeframes shown in Figures 16 and 17 we can see precisely what we might expect with civil society in a long decline until about 1940, a steady state for the next four decades and a dramatic upswing in usage from the late 1980s. In the two charts we can get greater insight into this. The two are in the same 1800-2000 and 1940-2008 scales we have been using above. The third, however, Figure 18, looks deeper into the past of that storied concept and examines the appearance of the term civil society in books from 1500 onward.

Figure 16. Comparison of the Terms Civil Society and Nonprofit, 1800-2000
Figure 17. Comparison of the Terms Civil Society and Nonprofit, 1940-2008

Figure 18 below proves to be one of the most interesting so far. It shows far greater interest usage of the term civil society shortly after 1750 than even the contemporary post1990 usage. The 1750 blip is undoubtedly related in some way to publication of Adam Ferguson’s classic on civil society and the interest it drew from continental Europe (especially Hegel) and elsewhere. Even more interesting – even curious – are two earlier blips: An early spike in usage of civil society roughly equal to the present interest around 1650 and an earlier (and completely unexpected) spike of use of the term nonprofit around 1600 that is fully half of the contemporary occurrences. This is a thread that ought to be of interest to third sector historians. The 1650 blip may well be related to English language interest in events of the time in associations in Amsterdam, but I am completely unable to fathom the earlier blip of interest in usage of civil society in published books around 1600 and the use of the term nonprofit at that time simply blows me away. In the following chart, the time scale is reduced to the period 1550-1760 for a closer look. It shows a variety of spikes of interest in civil society among 16th and 17th century authors that are completely unrecognized in contemporary literature.
Figure 18. Comparison of the Terms Civil Society and Nonprofit, 1500-2000 and a Closer Look at the Period 1560-1760
Voluntary Association

The term voluntary association has a much longer provenance in English language publications than many contemporary third sector scholars might anticipate (and a much more consistent pattern of usage prior to recent decades than the term nonprofit organization).

Figure 19. Voluntary Association, 1800-2000

Extending the time scale by 300 years to 1500-2000 (Figure 20) shows a much more dramatic pattern of fluctuations for voluntary association.
In Figure 21 we see a profile of the modern frequency of use of voluntary association from 1920-2000. That range was chosen specifically to look for a blip in the late 1940s or early 1950s due to the publication of the *Beveridge Report* in 1948.
Such a blip does show up, however, in Figure 22 for the term voluntary action both slightly before and after the Beveridge report was published in book form in 1948. One can also note a larger blip in the mid 1970s coinciding with the founding of the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars (AVAS) in the U.S. AVAS became ARNOVA in 1989 and is not only the longest-standing but also one of the foremost third sector research organizations in the world.

**Figure 22. Voluntary Action, 1920-2000**

Philanthropy and Nonprofit

Another interesting pair of terms for comparison are philanthropy and nonprofit. Philanthropy is a term that some sources trace back to ancient Greece, and as the two charts in Figure 23 show, the term does have a much longer pattern of usage than nonprofit, although it has been surpassed in frequency of use by the latter term since the 1970s. In any timescale, the term nonprofit was virtually unheard of prior to the mid 20th century. The longer time scale in the second chart (1500-2000) also suggests a couple of interesting but unexplained upticks in published references to philanthropy, after 1550 and around 1650. This also points toward a number of additional comparisons between philanthropy and other terms, as in the following four charts.
Figure 23. Comparisons of Philanthropy and Nonprofit, 1800-2000 and 1500-2000
Philanthropy and Charity (1500-2000)

Figure 24 shows at frequencies several orders of magnitude larger than the previous figure, published references to charity in English language books far exceeded published references to philanthropy in the entire period after 1550. At a more recent time scale (in Figure 25) we see that this trend continued all the way up to 2000, the upper limits of this particular database.

Figure 24. Comparison of Philanthropy and Charity, 1500-2000
Philanthropy and Charity (1940-2000)

Figure 25 does show, however, a relatively sharp decline in published references to charity in English language books after 1965, with a slight trend back upward beginning around 1985.

Figure 25. Comparison of Philanthropy and Charity, 1940-2000
Philanthropy, Charity and Civil Society

Figure 26, showing a three way comparison of philanthropy, charity and civil society, like the two previous charts, shows that philanthropy was much less commonly referred to in published English language books than the term charity after 1940. It also shows that civil society, like philanthropy, was much less frequently used, until that is around 1980 when there was a sudden and dramatic uptick in published references to civil society that continued through 2000.

Figure 26. Comparison of Philanthropy, Charity and Civil Society, 1940-2000
Philanthropy, Charity and Civil Society (1500-2000)

Figure 27 reveals a pattern for civil society usages that is very similar to that shown for philanthropy in Figure 24 and here. Both philanthropy and civil society were much less frequently referred to than charity throughout this entire 500 year period.

Figure 27. Comparison of Philanthropy, Charity and Civil Society, 1500-2000
Voluntary Association and Civil Society

Figure 28. Voluntary Association and Civil Society, 1800-2000

Comparison of usage of the terms voluntary association and civil society from 1800 to 2000 (in Figure 28) suggests a long, gradual decline in usages of civil society to sometime before 1920, a gradual increase to about 1980 and a dramatic increase in the incidence of the term since then.
Charity and Civil Society (1500-2000)

Comparisons of usage of charity and civil society over the past 500 years suggests several interesting spikes in the first term and gradually increasing use in the period 1600-1750 followed by a long, gradual decline (more recent evidence of which also shows up in several charts. The most dramatic thing in this chart is a dramatic, short term spike in the term charity around 1650. This spike is particularly noteworthy, coming as it did shortly after 1650, given the relatively smaller number of books published in the 17th century in comparison with the 19th and 20th centuries. It is entirely possible, however that the scale of this spike could be due to “selection bias” in the Google Books database favoring older volumes published in English. The various spikes, large and small, in the period 1500-1750 could also be related to various Reformations, Counter-Reformations and other religious developments.

Figure 29. Comparison of the Terms Charity and Civil Society, 1500-2000
Charity and Civil Society (1940-2000)

Figure 30. Comparison of the Terms Charity and Civil Society, 1940-2000
Volunteer

**Figure 31. Relative Frequency of the Term Volunteer, 1800-2000**

The final Ngram in this series examines the frequency of use of the term volunteer in English language books since 1800. Figure 31 shows the ups and downs in usage of this term. The spike around 1860, for example, might be related to the relatively frequent use of volunteer state militias in the American civil war. Likewise, the larger spike up to 1900 might be related to an uptick of volunteerism associated with the Progressive Era. I’m at a loss to explain the relatively sharp decline after 1910 and the fluctuations since then.

**Conclusion**

Taken together or individually, the NGrains shown in this Research Note illustrate something of the potential for understanding a portion of the history of a field through the frequency of word use in published books. It is worth remembering, finally, that in a field like contemporary Third Sector studies books are only a fraction of the published output of the field. Conference papers and journal articles probably represent the lion’s share of the published output of the field. However, under the current limitations of the Ngram data base, these cannot be measured in this way. Perhaps at some point the technology will enable us to do this.
References


