

## Power from the People: Assessing the New Online Participatory Tools for Your Organization

By Colin Delany, December 2006

*New online participatory tools like blogs, YouTube, and MySpace can be powerful and valuable – if they mesh with your goals. Colin Delany walks through the benefits and costs of common participatory tools and suggests which are likely to be useful for you.*

A few years ago, nonprofits and advocacy groups only had a handful of online tools to spread the word about themselves and their issues: if you had a website and an email list, you were pretty well covering the bases. Since the end of the dot-com boom, though, a whole new batch of applications has been simmering, and many have come to full boil in the last couple of years. From social media to blogs to viral marketing, these tools offer organizations entirely new avenues to find and interact with supporters and get their message out to the world.

The members of this recent crop of applications generally share a common characteristic: they depend on the active participation of many different people for their success. Loosely gathered together as "Web 2.0" technologies (a phrase that has almost as many definitions as it has definers), these "social" or "participatory" applications become more powerful as more people contribute.

Think about YouTube – one of a number of popular free video sharing websites. While a site with one person's video clips can be interesting, it's not likely to be revolutionary in the same way as a site that holds millions of people's clips and lets others to display them on their own sites. Blogs follow a similar logic, since bloggers are constantly referring to each other in an ongoing conversation as well as building content from readers' comments and contributions. Social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook? The same idea -- as more people participate, the value of the whole system tends to increase

Many companies and organizations are now establishing blogs, creating MySpace sites and YouTube channels. They are experimenting with social media as they look for new ways to interact with constituents and promote themselves. But of course, every

opportunity has costs as well as benefits, and each of the new technologies will absorb resources -- they'll demand your time at the very least. Considering your mission and communications goals, what tools and strategies are likely to be worth the effort? Let's look at the options one by one.

### Blogs

At one level, blogs are just websites that are easy to update. Despite the popular definition that blogs are online diaries, people use blogging software for all kinds of applications that don't involve sharing secrets with strangers, simply because blogs are such convenient publishing tools. But the common conception of a blog is a site that's frequently updated and that is the personal product of one or more authors. It can be a diary, an op-ed column, a community center, an outlet for art or investigative journalism, or a venue for shameless self-promotion. Blogs become true participatory tools when they interact with other blogs in "cross-blog conversation" and allow reader comments as part of an ongoing conversation.

### Should your organization have a blog?

A blog can be an inexpensive and effective tool for just about any kind of group that prioritizes external communications. They're particularly useful for organizations who would like to:

- Publicly advocate a particular point of view (point of view is what a blog is about)
- Showcase a well-known figure (like an executive director or celebrity) who is willing to blog their thoughts
- Demonstrate the day-to-day workings of their organization by asking staff members or volunteers to blog about their experiences

- Highlight the thoughts or work of the clients they serve
- Quickly and effectively respond to bloggers in their own sphere
- Highlight and discuss a specific short-term project

Blogs can also help draw search engine traffic, both from traditional search engines such as Google and blog-specific search tools like [Technorati](#).

Make sure, however, that you have the time and the things to say to become a real part of the conversation. A blog that's an obvious hack or an afterthought isn't going to do much good and may do a lot of harm, particularly if it makes you look phony or it's so bad that people make fun of it (the blogosphere can be a tough playground). Keeping a blog updated takes a lot of work (plan for a minimum of four hours a week) -- make sure that you have the internal capacity to keep it running before you start. An out-of-date blog, particularly one that just has a months-old launch announcement and no follow-up articles, just makes you look bad.

Even if your organization doesn't start its own blog, you can still work with bloggers to get your ideas out into the world. Start by monitoring blogs to see who's writing about your issues (Technorati is a good place to start), and consider getting in touch with the authors directly when you have something that you think they might write about. Think of bloggers as journalists with particularly cheap printing presses. Don't bombard them with dry press releases, though -- they'll generally ignore those. A personal pitch is usually much more effective. Be authentic!

## Online Video

Good video can make your case in a dramatic and immediate way and is often the centerpiece of viral campaigns (see below). Organizations have been posting videos on their own sites for years, but broadband's easy availability and the recent explosion of video posting sites like [YouTube](#), [ourmedia.org](#), [blip.tv](#), and [revver](#) makes it much easier than before to publish your videos to a wider audience. Website visitors no longer hesitate to click on video links like they might have a few years ago, and you're not going to lack for places to put the movies you'd like to include on your website.

If you have video, digitizing and posting is straightforward. These days, you're more likely to be limited by your ability to create high quality video in the first place -- although plenty of people are doing amazing things with \$300 video cameras.

Organizations can also use video as an active outreach tool by posting clips publicly on sites like Google video or YouTube, hoping to capture new supporters as they come across them. Most sites will allow you to create a "channel" that gathers all of your videos in one place and may allow you to link back to your website. "Watermarking" your videos so that your main URL is constantly visible and adding your organization's logo and url to your account profile is a good idea. Pay close attention to content ownership rights and user agreement! Some sites will reserve the right to use your content for their own purposes.

Posting videos is the beginning of the battle, but if you really want them to be seen, you'll need to spread the word using all of your normal promotional mechanisms. Link to them from your main website, promote them to your email list, and make sure that it's as easy as possible for viewers to forward your link to others and to display your video on their own sites (a feature generally built into video-sharing sites). Also, keep in mind that YouTube and other video-sharing sites generally display a handful of popular or noteworthy clips on their front page and on category pages, and your viewership can spike if you can build enough traffic on your own to start being featured.

## Should your organization use online videos?

If you have already produced high quality and compelling videos, adding clips to your website and sites like YouTube is likely worth the effort. In general, short, high-impact pieces that are two to three minutes long tend to be most successful. You'll need to have your piece digitized for the web, but this is a straightforward process that can be done for under a few hundred dollars by most video professionals. Sites like YouTube then provide detailed instructions that allow anyone with a bit of technical know-how to upload a video and post it on their organization's site.

If you don't have video already, creating new pieces can be a great way to highlight your organization, particularly if you deal with a particularly visual or tangible cause. It's not an inexpensive endeavor, however. You'll need to shoot the footage (or create animations, if desired), and then carefully edit it to tell a

story. This requires equipment, skill, and creativity – and likely, a staff member, volunteer, or consultant with in-depth video experience.

## RSS Feeds

From the glamour of blogs and video, let's turn to the simplest of Web 2.0 tools, RSS. Really Simple Syndication (or Rich Site Syndication) allows easy notification when a site is updated. At their simplest and most common, RSS feeds send subscribers the title and a blurb about each new post on a given site or blog, along with a link to the full piece. Originally, subscribers used specialized feed reading software to keep up with RSS feeds, but many sites now aggregate and display feeds from a variety of sources. Web start pages such as those on Google and at MyYahoo, for instance, allow people to choose and display the feeds they want to follow.

Over the last couple of years, most major media outlets have implemented RSS to allow their readers to keep up with site changes as they happen. RSS feeds are built into most blogging software and are so common in the blogosphere that they are becoming critical to a site's credibility among bloggers as an information source.

### Should your organization use RSS feeds?

Using a start page or RSS reader makes it much easier to keep up with news and articles in your field and mentions of your organization. As such, every organization should take a look. To get started, the BBC has a [nice guide to reading feeds](#).

What about creating RSS feeds for your own content? If your website isn't frequently updated and you're communicating with a mainstream audience, a RSS feed isn't critical. However, it can be useful in attracting the attention of a more technical audience and allowing people to follow frequently updated content. A feed is a must if you want bloggers in particular to follow your cause or opinions. Setting up a feed isn't difficult (see for instance, Webreference.com's [Introduction to RSS](#)), and is likely worth adding to your website in your next site update. As more and more people read RSS feeds without even realizing it (on their start pages or through an aggregating site), organizations that don't have their own RSS feed will be missing a potential audience.

## Social Networking

Just in the last year or so, nonprofits have begun using social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook to spread their messages and to actively fish for supporters. To join social networking sites, organizations create "profile pages". An organization profile usually has basic information about the group along with links to more detailed content, usually on the group's own website. You can generally also host videos and pictures as well as start a blog through your organization's profile.

Social networking sites connect you with supporters by allowing them to become your "friends," which means that a link to their profile shows up on your profile and vice versa. Thus, your name and your organization's image (your logo, or something more compelling) will appear on pages throughout the site if you build up enough friends.

To get friends, you can contact people directly who are already friends with other profiles in your interest area (for instance, other environmental groups if you're an environmental group), and you'll also pick up friend requests from people who stumble across you on your friends' profiles. You may want to promote your issues to your friend list regularly through bulletins (mass messages) and asking friends to post your alerts on their profiles. If your organization has an email activist list or email newsletter, you can build up a nucleus of supporters quickly if you ask your list to become your friends, since many of them will already be on the more popular networking sites.

### Should your organization use social networking sites?

These sites are very inexpensive, but will require time and thought. Just as with a blog, your profile will need to be updated regularly, and you'll need to take the time to respond to "friend" requests. Your social networking strategy will also need to be integrated into your overall communications strategy-- your MySpace profile should be no less on-message than your normal website, although the look and feel may be different.

If you have the time, and are trying to reach the types of people most likely to be using social networking (such as young people, or particularly "plugged in" types), these tools are worth a look. While this is a new and experimental communications method, a number of nonprofits have been very successful in using these

sites to reach out to new supporters and also to communicate with a large audience.

## Social Media

Social media and social networking are sometimes confused, but social media is a much broader concept - it refers generally to content that is created by site users rather than by a central person or group. [Flickr](#) and [Wikipedia](#) are great examples, as are blogs that allow comments. How can organizations use social media concepts?

Several groups have had great success asking supporters to edit and submit video clips that are then displayed on the group's website. An organization could also solicit slogans from supporters, ask them to contribute their own personal stories or essays to an online presentation, provide them with photos to embellish with captions and speech bubbles, or ask them to vote or comment on ads, speeches and position papers.

### Should your organization ask for social media contributions?

Allowing your members or readers to generate content has some real strengths as a tactic. For one thing, it allows you to capture the brainpower of far more people than you could reasonably hire -- you can leverage the collective intelligence of a chunk of the Internet. For another, it's a terrific tool for community building. When your supporters submit content to your site, they can feel like they're really contributing -- they're part of the team. Participating ties them to you and your issues at an emotional level. Organizations that have a strong supporter base or a topic that will interest a wide audience, and a smart promotion strategy, could get a lot of value out of community generated content.

Do bear in mind that you'll probably want to filter the content that arrives, just in case someone posts something obscene or that would embarrass your organization. Promptly contact people whose work you reject, though, to make sure any hard feelings get smoothed over. And don't be afraid to let criticism slip onto your site -- it can be quite effective to allow a critic's words to stand, as long as you refute the message politely.

## Viral Marketing

Ah, viral marketing: endlessly appealing, endlessly frustrating. The concept? Let's create content so compelling that it spreads itself -- people are so taken with it that they pass it along to friends. Viral campaigns frequently center around video, but they can also involve Flash animations or games, e-cards, and very occasionally action alerts or petitions.

Why is viral marketing frustrating? Predicting what content will take off is extremely difficult even for experience marketers. Creating it is even harder, since you can't just throw money or creativity at a potentially viral project and expect it to work. The VAST majority of viral attempts sink without a ripple.

What if you do end up with content that's so amazing that you really believe it will take off? How can you give your virus the best chance of spreading? Take a lesson from the Jim Webb for Senate campaign this year. The legendary "Macaca" video didn't spread itself -- the campaign worked very hard to get people to view it. Besides posting it on YouTube, Webb's people worked behind the scenes to get political reporters writing about it, contacted sympathetic bloggers across the country and also blasted it out to their own email list. They knew that a fire lit in dozens of places is much more likely to catch than one fed by a single spark. In their case, it worked -- the video was seen hundreds of thousands of times online and was then picked up on television and put in front of millions of viewers.

### Should your organization attempt a viral campaign?

Viral marketing is a high-risk, high-reward proposition. You'll need amazing content, a willingness to devote a lot of time or money to effectively promote it, and the stomach to accept that it's likely that your campaign will fail miserably regardless of the effort you put in. But if your campaign hits, there's potential for huge success, with national exposure and tremendous increases in your subscriber list.

## Other Options

These are the major social software tools that organizations are looking at, but you might also consider wikis (behind the scenes as project management tools or in public as educational tools), social news sites such as [Digg](#) (to promote your issues and stories) and social bookmarking sites such as

Del.icio.us (for promotion or your own research). New applications are popping up all the time! Sites like Micropersuasion and techcrunch.com can help you keep track of them.

## Wrapping it Up

What have we learned? The online communications options open to nonprofits and advocacy organizations have expanded dramatically over the past couple of years, and we need to choose among them carefully:

some, like RSS, are straightforward and easy to adopt, but others (like blogs) will absorb a lot of staff time if they're to be used properly. True social media concepts will require something more -- a change in outlook. Communications campaigns are used to controlling a message, but participatory media ask us to take a risk and rely on our supporters instead. It's a jump many will be reluctant to take, but one that's already rewarding those who do.

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