Blogging

When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over the years, either.

—Senator Trent Lott, December 5, 2002

This statement from a Mississippi senator at the one hundredth birthday of former South Carolina senator Strom Thurmond may sound like benign birthday flattery—if it weren't for the fact that Thurmond's 1948 presidential campaign promoted racial segregation. A young ABC News reporter assigned to cover the event concluded that Lott's comment might imply that he also supported segregation. The reporter thought he had a major news story. But ABC's senior staff disagreed, deciding to run the story briefly on television at four-thirty in the morning and to publish a short piece about it on its Web site.[1] By the next day, the story was effectively dead in the mainstream press.

But it did not go unnoticed in the "blogosphere," that massive decentralized group of people who publish online personal journals. Several politically oriented bloggers read the story and began to investigate. They found that Lott had voted against the renewal of the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act; opposed the Martin Luther King holiday;[2]

affiliated himself with the Council of Conservative Citizens, classified as a hate group by the Anti-Defamation League; and wrote articles for publications espousing white separatism.[3]

Bloggers filled in details that were missing from the original report, and the story spread rapidly across the Internet.[4] Within a week, thousands of bloggers had republished it, and many called for Lott's resignation. Sensing a grassroots groundswell, the mainstream press ran the story again, only this time reporters added the historical details that bloggers had uncovered. The press turned the issue into a full-blown scandal. Lott quickly lost the support of the White House and his Senate colleagues; he resigned as Senate Republican leader on December 20, 2002.[5]

Bloggers had arrived: their intense focus on an obscure story forced it to national attention. Mainstream media were no longer the sole conduit through which current events became News.

For many people, particularly youth, blogging is more than a source of political news; it is a mechanism for self-expression, identity formation, and entertainment. According to a recent Pew Internet and American Life survey, about twelve million Americans keep a blog, and fifty-seven million Americans read them. Over half are under the age of thirty, and most view blogging as a creative way to share their experiences with others.[6] The impact of blogging in the political and social spheres has been so sudden and wide reaching that social scientists, marketers, politicians, and many others are struggling to understand how it affects their domain.

Although blogging's role in modern life is complex, its premise is simple. *Blogging software makes Web publishing easy.* Once the province of highly technical webmasters, Web publishing is now about as difficult as sending an e-mail. Within ten minutes, anyone with access to a computer can create a blog, publish an article, and call themselves a blogger. One key innovation of these publishing systems is that they allow the reader to *talk back.* After every article, a "comments" area invites written response. Popular blog articles have become long conversations between readers and the original author.

Over the past several years, blogging has evolved into a distinct literary and media form. Although there is no official body that determines what qualifies as blogging, bloggers generally value personal and authentic language, are willing to listen to and allow criticism in comments, write frequently, and participate in the community of bloggers by writing comments on related blogs. The first blogs took the form of personal diaries. Today, however, businesses, politicians, and nonprofit organizations use blogs for a variety of purposes. Growth has been explosive: fewer than fifty blogs existed in 1999, but now over seventy million populate the Internet.[7]

This chapter explores the ways organizations have used blogs to achieve mission-related objectives and build relationships with bloggers. Bloggers can profoundly affect public perception of a candidate, issue, or organization. It's vital to establish credibility and connection with the blogging community in order to have a voice in this increasingly important forum.

How Organizations Are Using Blogs

Starting an organizational blog is one of the fastest routes for telling the story of your candidate or cause, demonstrating expertise in your field, and engaging supporters in conversation. They are easy to set up and inexpensive to maintain. For many organizations, blogging may be the ideal gateway to participation in the Web 2.0 movement.

As a point of introduction to blogosphere vernacular, *posts* is the term used to refer to blog writings. The word is used interchangeably as a noun and verb—for example, "Don't bother me, I'm working on a blog post" or "I'll be ready to eat dinner after I post to my blog." I'll employ these linguistic conventions throughout this chapter.

Providing Limited Participation in a Story

Mitt Romney's "Five Brothers" blog lies at the heart of his presidential campaign's Internet strategy. In shades of the *Brady Bunch,* Romney's five sons write about their dad, the issues they face, and life on the

campaign trail. Tagg, the eldest at age thirty-seven, loves the Red Sox and has three kids. Craig, the youngest at twenty-six years old, would like to meet Conan O'Brien someday. On the day I visited the blog, Josh, thirty-one, had just posted a photo of himself and his two children visiting a state fair in Iowa. A funnel cake stand was illuminated in the distance. You could almost hear the American flag flapping gently in the wind and the sounds of the carnival rides. Without sounding scripted or "spun," the blog reinforced Romney's key campaign message: family values.

From a communications standpoint, the Romney campaign has scored a big hit. The blog medium helped the campaign deliver a message that sounds (and probably is) authentic. At the same time, it's also a message that has been carefully crafted to contrast Romney against his twice-divorced competitor, Rudolph Giuliani, who no longer speaks with his adult children.

The mainstream media have picked up on this angle in dozens of articles and television spots. They echo the family values sentiment in such statements as this from the *Times* Online: "The brothers are so handsome and wholesome that they bring to mind the Osmonds,"[8] and this from the *Washington Post:* "Wholesome does not really begin to describe the five adult children of Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, who for the past few weeks have been sharing such details on Five Brothers."[9] If nothing else, the blog serves as a continuous feed of the family values message to the press. But it's also a hit with supporters. According to rankings from Alexa.com, the blog is the most popular part of Romney's Web site outside the home page.[10]

From a technical perspective, the Romneys are using blog software to publish content to the Web. It provides the brothers with a simple tool for posting new material every day. The campaign hired a designer to make the blog look good, and the software does the rest.

However, the blog provides the campaign with more than a Web publishing system: it offers a framework for telling a story. Blogs add a date and time stamp to each article and insert the most recent article at the

top of the page. This reverse chronological structure creates a serial-like quality which suggests that a new installment is coming soon. The Romneys don't need to invent new ways to keep supporters interested; the blog automatically provides a known storytelling device.

Before reading a word, experienced blog readers expect the Romneys' blog to offer an honest, personal, and straightforward account. Organizations that rehash promotional writings better suited for marketing brochures find that blog readers are extremely critical. Readers will berate these as "fake blogs" or "flogs." Generally, the Romneys' blog does meet readers' expectations, although it runs some risk of being perceived as a flog, for unlike most blogs, it limits interactions between authors and readers. Comments are accepted, but controversial ones are left unanswered. The Romneys have responded to a question about campaigning on Sundays as Mormons, but ignored a question asking about the brothers' willingness to volunteer for the Iraq War.[11] However, they don't delete these questions. The campaign successfully walks the line between marketing and authenticity by leaving challenging comments on the site.

The blog gives the campaign an approachable and personable face while telling a great ongoing story. It keeps supporters engaged while avoiding "off-message" conversations. It may be possible to increase youth engagement by making this interaction richer, but the Romneys manage to make effective use of their blog while staying within the limits of their comfort zone and campaign strategy.

Offering Deep Participation and Social Connection

Amnesty International aims to engage and connect human rights activists around the world. It has 2.2 million members in more than 150 countries. Traditionally, the organization used newsletters and e-mail alerts to communicate with members. Although these media worked, Amnesty felt uncomfortable being the "sole authoritative voice" and wanted to create a more balanced relationship between staff and activists. In contrast to Romney, the organization thrives on community-driven conversation and debate. Starting a blog was a natural fit.

The Amnesty blog features five topic areas and engages readers in a lively discussion via comments. Blog posts convey timely news, upcoming Amnesty events, and ways to take action. Although Amnesty continues to offer authoritative analysis, it also invites supporters to create dialogue around that analysis. Amnesty starts the story, and supporters then make it their own.

Amnesty's blog gives activists a source of inspiration and a space to connect with one another. By playing host, Amnesty is able to take the pulse of activist thought and action. It monitors and participates in these discussions in order to inform future action. Compared with a newsletter or e-mail alert, the blog offers a much richer forum for dialogue, community building, and learning.

One of Amnesty's key objectives is to encourage *offline* action, which the blog achieves. On the day I visited, a recent post in the "Student Activism" area called for students to spend some of their summer vacation sending postcards. Another article reported the successes of the previous summer's postcard-writing campaign, which resulted in the release of five prisoners of conscience from Belarus and Israel.[12] Amnesty's blog both asks for participation and shows results from past involvement, a method of engagement often called "closing the feedback loop." The loop begins when a supporter takes action and closes when the organization shows the results of that action.

Organizations often fail to close the loop due to limited time or financial resources. However, it's one of the most effective methods for retaining and engaging supporters.[13] Young supporters want to know that their efforts have not gone to waste, and the blog offers an inexpensive and quick way to close the loop.

Whereas the Romney campaign considers conversation around difficult issues a potential risk, Amnesty thrives on this type of discussion. Dan McQuillan, Amnesty's interim Internet director, says that the organization is still in the process of exploring social media, but that thus far, use of such technology as blogging has led to richer conversation around human rights issues, generated action, and resulted in access to new audiences.[14]

Ways to Use Blogs

Blogs can be used to

- **Announce**
  - Events
  - New products, services, and initiatives
- **React immediately** to public criticism or praise
- **Convey** organizational messaging and identity
- **Involve** constituents by asking questions and listening to responses
- **Close the feedback loop**
  - Give results of fundraising efforts
  - Tell volunteers what they've achieved
  - Report back from conferences and events

Reporting Alternative News

At age seventeen, Gwen Araujo was brutally murdered after several men discovered that she was biologically male. As the trial of the accused murderers began, the Community United Against Violence (CUAV), a nonprofit dedicated to preventing violence against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, started a blog to document the proceedings. CUAV's bloggers were intimately familiar with the issues and provided an alternative analysis of the trial while the mainstream media delivered sensational sound bites. The blog provided a forum for the community to vent their anger, share frustrations, and watch the trial unfold from the perspective of like-minded individuals.[15]

The mainstream media don't always report a story in depth, due to a number of restraints. Some stories don't appeal to a wide enough audience, certain advertisers will find some content objectionable, and television time and print space are limited resources. As a blogger, you are free of these limitations. You can use a blog to tell the story from the perspective of your constituency and to provide depth where the mainstream media have glossed over the issues.

Improving Internal Communications

The qualities of blogs that resonate so well with supporters can also improve an organization's internal communications, creating opportunities for collaboration, discussion, and ad hoc documentation.

Matias Fernandez Dutto, a PR strategist and management consultant specializing in social technologies, presents this excellent list of the benefits of using a blog internally:[16]

- It improves participatory spirit, collaboration, and the capabilities of team learning. It is ideal for running projects and working with heterogeneous teams. It is also useful to promote dialogue and find lateral ideas outside the team.

- It allows integrating conversations with a shared vision. It is an excellent means for the leaders to communicate.

- It is the space where interpretations and different points of view come up so that any member of the organization can discuss and debate them.

- It is an excellent means for the employees to achieve an integrated vision of the company by joining in conversations.

- It implies an open communication platform that allows new ways of relating and coordinating actions among the organizational members and between the latter and the network of external relationships.

- It becomes the written memory of the organization. Furthermore, writing conveys emotional stability, which eventually promotes the process of organizational development.

- It speeds up the transference and transformation of knowledge to make ideas flow easily and take learning into action.

Moreover, blogs can help create a workplace in which young people thrive. Although an extended discussion of internal organizational practices is beyond the scope of this book, keep this capability in mind if you're thinking about starting a blog.

You can also use a blog to keep the story in the news. The mainstream media coverage of the Gwen Araujo case died after the first trial, but CUAV provided ongoing blog reporting and analysis of the second trial. Eventually, the blog drew the attention of the mainstream media and kept the story in the public eye. For grieving members of Araujo's community, the blog offered some reconciliation. It created a space for reacting to, supplementing, and influencing the mainstream news. At the same time, it served as a forum for discussion and support.

Harnessing Super-Supporters

Teens are often much more enthusiastic authors and readers of blogs than their adult counterparts, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project.[17] Pew classifies 8 percent of the population as Internet "omnivores," that is, users who consume the Internet with fervor. These users see the Internet as a "platform for participation and self-expression," and they tend to be young. More than half of heavy Internet users are under the age of thirty (versus one in five in the general population), and 42 percent are students with access to high-speed and wireless networks at school.[18]

Some organizations are blessed with a contingent of these active young supporters, but may find it difficult to harness their collective energy. One solution is to create a *community blogging platform*, an umbrella site where super-supporters can operate their own blogs. This approach can strengthen community, centralize activity, and maintain the vital interest of young supporters.

The Obama 2008 campaign launched one of the first community blogging platforms in the political sphere. In a few minutes, supporters can create their own blog and start posting about Obama, or whatever else they see fit. On the day I visited the community blog, one young supporter posted images of himself and a few friends canvassing in the Iowa rain. Another reported highlights from Obama's speech at the Yearly Kos convention. The headline from another read, "Senator Obama wake up! You are losing and it's time for change!"

As you can see, the community blog offers a space for both support and criticism, and the campaign benefits from both. These blogs have allowed supporters to create their own grassroots marketing propaganda, while also increasing the campaign's ability to quickly understand the zeitgeist of its support. Blogs are an early-warning sign: if candidates are indeed losing the race, they'll hear about it first on the blog.

Unlike the Romney campaign, which follows a top-down communication strategy that offers limited space for supporting and reacting to the campaign, Obama's blogging strategy allows his super-supporters to engage with the candidate on many different messages—and to give feedback to the campaign. If a message doesn't work, the campaign will hear about it and can quickly adjust. The blog functions as a massive and inexpensive focus group.

At the same time, it harnesses the energies of super-supporters to cocreate campaign messages and spread these messages throughout their network of friends. Romney's sons may be charismatic personalities and frequent writers, but there are only five of them. They can't hope to match the reach of Obama's thousands.

Adopting a community blogging strategy is not without risk. After you have made an investment in software and time, there is a real possibility that no one will make the effort to create a blog under your umbrella. Potential bloggers have so many possible avenues for creating online content that you will have to convince supporters that your umbrella is better. A community blog with a lot of activity will attract new supporters. Conversely, a sparsely populated one will convey a lack of interest and a sense of irrelevance.

To counteract this risk, your organization will need to make an up-front investment in blog marketing and an ongoing commitment to blogger outreach. You'll need someone to guide your community blogging initiative to ensure that your bloggers remain active and engaged, while providing incentives to do so. Clearly, this level of commitment would strain the resources of many organizations. For those that can manage it, however, a community blog provides a compelling method for engaging supporters and learning from them.

Blog Fundraising

According to market research company comScore Media Metrix, blog readers are 11 percent more likely than the average Internet user to have incomes of or greater than $75,000. They tend to make more purchases online and also spend 6 percent more than the average Internet user.[19]

Clearly, these statistics don't refer to the majority of young people. But it's worth mentioning that many organizations use their blogs to raise funds from readers.[20] An engaging story puts people in the right frame of mind to donate. When addressing young audiences, however, it may make more sense to ask for another form of participation. Many young people seek authentic engagement and the opportunity to participate beyond writing a check.[21] However, see the chapter on social networking for one fundraising method that seems to be working among youth.

Creating a Sounding Board

In the discussion of Obama's blog, I touched briefly on the idea of using a blog to conduct market research. Some people use their blogs *primarily* in this way, posting new ideas, possible strategic directions, and preliminary campaign materials to the blog and inviting feedback prior to making a commitment. Martin Kearns, executive director of Green Media Toolshed, describes this approach:

> I am the type of yahoo who gets lots of thoughts and thinks better "externally." . . . Unfortunately, it means that I say lots of dumb things . . . but I get to throw them out and get snagged by fellow bloggers. It catches the mistakes or reinforces good ideas and helps me edit more of my thoughts. . . . I know the language, writing, and thoughts are often way more convoluted than I would ever kick out in a meeting or for work products. I also mess up typing and spelling all over the place. However, I am pretty comfortable with the idea that I am not stupid and that cranking stuff out on the blog helps me refine my thoughts. I am verbose. I am comfortable that I make mistakes and I am not perfect. . . . Seeing my thoughts online may actually serve to make me more comfortable with the idea that some mistakes are OK.[22]

Some organizations would be wise to use their blogs as Kearns does. In February 2007, the Buffalo chapter of the American Red Cross put up billboards with the following headline: "Terrorist Strike Leaves City in Chaos. November 9, 2009." In small print, the advertisement described a biochemical attack.

The billboard incensed many people in the community, who decried it as an act of fear mongering. One frequent Red Cross donor described her reaction: "I find it absolutely despicable that this organization has chosen to further the unwarranted state of fear that many citizens of this country currently live in by advertising in this manner. . . . The money spent on this absurdity should have gone to those in need. I will not yet withdraw my monetary support; but I am greatly disheartened by this distasteful waste."[23]

On February 21, citing negative reactions from the community, the Red Cross removed the billboards.[24] If the Buffalo chapter had taken Kearns's approach and vetted the advertisement on its blog, it would have saved thousands of dollars and the ire of many supporters. Allowing blog readers to participate in the design and direction of the organization's initiatives would have also generated loyalty. Young people, in particular, want to know that their opinion matters. Using a blog as a sounding board demonstrates your commitment to hearing other opinions.[25]

You don't have to set up your own blog to do market research, however. On a daily basis, over seventy million bloggers are creating a mounting treasure trove of data. You can harvest this data for key insights about your supporters and organization. When young people talk about your issues, you can learn what they're saying. When they speak about your organization, you'll hear about it. Setting up systems to track blogosphere conversation serves as an inexpensive form of market research, using one of the biggest focus groups on the planet. It can also function as an early warning system for breaking news that affects your organization.

> To learn more about easy ways to track
> issues in the blogosphere, head to
> **mobilizingyouth.org/resources/blogs_research_tool**

Building a Training Tool

"AFL/CIO Endorses Homer Simpson"

"Video Shows That Maggie Is a Revolutionary New Kind of Leader"

"Looking and Sounding Presidential, Krusty Klown"

These headlines were featured on the home page of the New Organizing Institute's blog in summer 2007. Trainees enrolled in NOI's week-long boot camp for young progressive activists ran a mock race for president in which they selected characters from *The Simpsons* as their candidates and waged political warfare against each other. NOI's directors turned the blog into a simulated media channel, giving trainees permission to post at will. As the week progressed, the trainees reveled in their ability to create and distribute faux campaign propaganda. They posted interview transcripts, campaign videos, and breaking news stories. They explored the concepts of Web metrics, earned media, and microtargeting. The blog provided an outlet for creativity while teaching the trainees how to run an Internet campaign.

The blog offered an engaging learning environment that won rave reviews from trainees. It wasn't the focus of the institute's efforts or even an ongoing project. Instead, the organization made creative use of a blog to support a primarily offline project. Blogs enable multiple authors with little technical expertise to publish photos, video, and written text to the Web. Most people use them to publish articles in diary format, but by being creative, you can apply the benefits of blogging to other purposes. You may find that the blog offers a compelling alternative to traditional tools, such as PowerPoint presentations.

Managing Blogger Relations

After the Trent Lott episode, politicians, corporations, and nonprofits realized that they needed a blogosphere strategy. One year later, Republican senator Rick Santorum was quoted equating homosexuality with bestiality. The progressive blogosphere ignited. The same bloggers who lacerated Lott condemned Santorum. But this time the GOP was prepared to take control of the message first. President Bush intervened early to express support for Santorum and frame the story before the bloggers could take control of it. Bush promoted a softer interpretation of the bestiality comments, and the mainstream media reflected this muted stance. Public outrage was contained, and Santorum kept his job.[26]

Without a doubt, Bush's preemptive strike tactic was effective, but it required major political muscle and would be a difficult strategy to maintain over the long term. Instead, many organizations have begun to build relationships with bloggers that enable them to have a degree of influence in terms of promoting stories, framing issues, and responding to breaking news.

Like their audiences, bloggers expect personal conversations. They respond to sincere efforts to engage in their community, and to people who build relationships prior to a pressing need. Identify bloggers who are naturally aligned with your organization's positions and get to know them. Supply them with original content for their posts. Human Rights Watch provides ongoing story leads and issue analysis to help bloggers write new stories. This effort builds credibility and puts the organization in a strong position to ask favors at a later date.

A handful of elite political bloggers now wield tremendous influence, but like celebrity reporters, they're in constant demand and are therefore more difficult to contact. However, they rely on so-called B-list bloggers for story sourcing. By looking at comments and links on an elite blogger's site, you can begin to understand the structure of his or her network.[27] You can reach out to the less popular bloggers and become a trusted source to them. In turn, they will feed your perspective and ideas to the elite bloggers.

By developing trusted relationships and treating bloggers as a core part of your outreach efforts, you can take a proactive role in shaping news that affects your organization. You'll also be prepared to respond rapidly to negative news and to promote your achievements.

Microblogging

term

One of the fastest-growing phenomena on the Internet is known as *microblogging*. Microbloggers write just a sentence or fragment at a time, and their postings are less formal and more frequent. If a blog tells the story of someone's day-to-day life, microblogging describes it moment to moment. Young people use microblogging sites like Twitter and Jaiku to write one- or two-sentence updates about what they're doing at that precise moment.

So far, microblogs are being used primarily to communicate among friends, but they offer fertile ground for engaging young people in civic and political life. LiveEarth uses microblogging to advocate for environmental conservation; San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom keeps constituents apprised of events at City Hall; NASA builds community support through a live connection to the happenings at its Moffett Field facility; and conferences such as South by Southwest enable attendees to share the event with friends who weren't able to make it. At press time, Wired Online was considering using microblogging to gather real-time intelligence from a broad swath of amateur journalists.

> The promise of microblogging is just beginning to unfold. Learn more at
> **mobilizingyouth.org/microblogging**

How Blogs Work

In this section, we'll look both at the basics of blogging software and at more recent innovations that have added a wide array of options.

Blogging Basics

All blogging software shares three core components:

1. A simple mechanism for publishing text and images to the Web[28]

2. An automated system that displays posts in reverse-chronological order

3. A mechanism for readers to submit public comments about a post

To understand these components in context, let's look at two screen-shots from the popular blog software Blogger, created by Evan Williams (who also has contributed a Big Picture essay to this book). Figure 1.1 shows the user interface for publishing text and images to the Web.

Figure 1.1. Screen for Writing a New Blog Post

As you can see, the simple interface looks similar to such document-editing software as Microsoft Word. Type in the white box, and click "Publish Post." Blogger's automated system then generates a Web page that displays the new post at the top of the page. It also builds in a link that allows readers to comment on the post. Figure 1.2 shows two sample articles I've posted to my new blog.

Figure 1.2. Two Posts on My New Blog
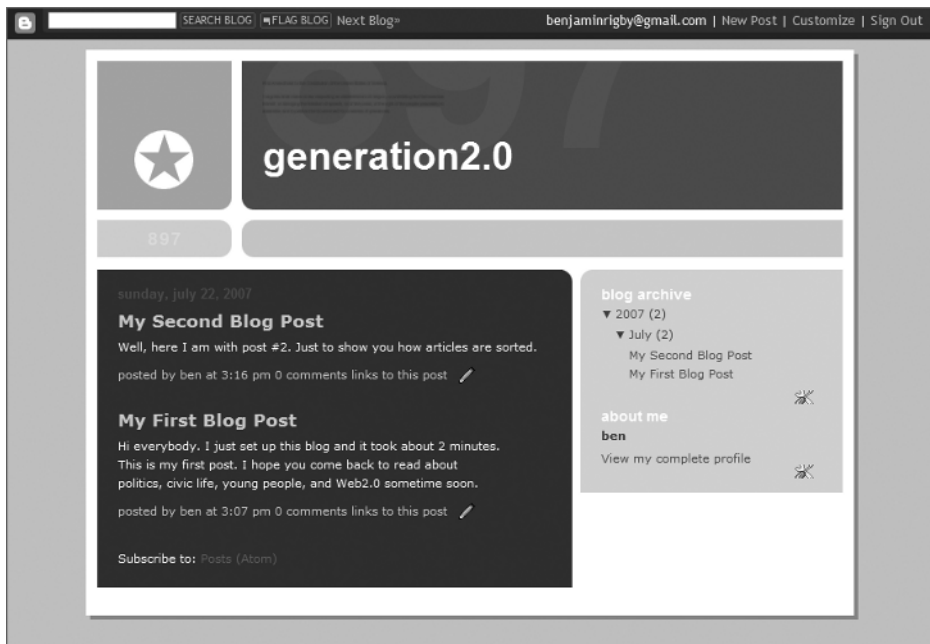
The most recent post is listed at the top. Note the comments link beneath each post. Most blogging software allows the blog owner to choose whether he or she wants to allow public comments, allow approved comments, or not allow any comments. During the two-minute setup process, I chose this design template from among many possibilities. Most blogging software offers a range of predesigned templates from which to choose. If you have a bit more technical knowledge, you can customize the blog design to match your organization's brand identity.

Other Key Blogging Features

Blogging software in its early form comprised only the aforementioned three core components, which facilitate easy Web publishing in diary format. The meteoric rise in the popularity of blogging, however, was brought about by the somewhat later addition of several components, which encouraged people to share and distribute their blog postings. The following are brief descriptions of these newer features.

Permalinks   Over time, numerous posts accumulate on a blog home page. On the earliest blogs, it became difficult to find an individual post. To give directions, a blogger would have to say something like "Go to myblog.com and scroll three-fourths of the way down the page and look for the post called 'blogs are easy.'" Permalinking systems solve this problem by making a copy of each post at a distinct Web address (URL). With permalinks, a blogger can give much simpler directions, such as, "Go to myblog.com/blogs-are-easy."

Trackbacks   Book authors cite references with footnotes or endnotes. Bloggers cite references using trackbacks. These are not ordinary references, however. Trackbacks weave the blogosphere together, inserting the citation on both the referenced and the referring blog.

> Learn more about trackbacks and related
> technologies, such as pingbacks, at
> **mobilizingyouth.org/trackbacks**

Blogroll   A blogroll is a list of links to favorite blogs; its name derives from "honor roll." Bloggers use their blogrolls to express affinity and respect for other bloggers. The convention has helped create a sense of community among bloggers and facilitated the flow of readers among blogs. A listing on a popular blogroll can raise a blog from obscurity to prominence. In the words of one researcher, "links and pageviews are the currency of the blogosphere . . . [and] the most reliable way to gain traffic [readership] is through a link on another [blog]."[29]

o   o   o

Combined with blogging's core components, these newer features tie the network of bloggers together, creating a symbiotic blog universe. They encourage readers to jump from blog to blog following personalities and stories. Bloggers stand to benefit by becoming active participants in a blogging community: frequent commenting, reviewing, and posting generate increased readership.

You'll also find the following three features in use on blogs. However, they're not exclusive to blogs. In fact, they underpin most Web 2.0 technologies. We'll discuss them throughout the remainder of this book.

Feeds Using what is known as a *feed reader,* you can read stories from many blogs all in one place. Most blogs display a link that indicates an available feed. See bottom left of Figure 1.2. You'll see a link that says "Subscribe to: Posts (Atom)." Clicking this link will launch your Web browser's mechanism for adding a feed to your feed reader of choice. Sometimes this link reads "Subscribe to Feed" or simply "RSS," which is the name of one popular feed technology (there are several). Unfortunately, the words and graphics used to indicate an available feed are not consistent across blogs.

Learn more about feeds at

mobilizingyouth.org/feeds

I've told my feed reader (Google Reader) to get the feeds from about a hundred blogs. Google Reader lists the headlines in a centralized location. If an article piques my interest, I click the headline to read the entire story. Feed readers save minutes of clicking, scanning, and waiting for pages to load.

Feeds are one of the most important innovations driving the Web 2.0 movement. They've enabled people to quickly scan a large number of blogs and other types of Web content, such as bookmarks, news, photos, and videos. Moreover, feeds have enabled *computers* to quickly scan, import, and use large quantities of data (such as blog posts) by formatting the data according to known standards.

Tagging   A tag is a short phrase or keyword that identifies a piece of content. For example, if this chapter were a blog post, I might tag it with the following phrases: "blogging," "microblogging," "young people," "Rock the Vote," "Generation 2.0 book," "nonprofit," and "politics." These are my self-selected descriptors for the contents of this chapter.

Like feeds, tagging is one of Web 2.0's primary enabling technologies. By entering this simple list of phrases, I've accomplished the following:

- **Helped search engines find my work.** I've given search engines a starting point for categorizing my blog post. If someone searches for any of these phrases, the engine will have to do less work to identify a relevant result.

- **Created my own flexible organizing system.** Over time, I will be able to view all my content according to tags. For example, I might want to see all my blog posts that match the tags "microblogging" and "Generation 2.0 book." By using this combination of tags, I can quickly find relevant content.

- **Contributed to a Web-wide organizing system.** By tagging my own work, I've joined the worldwide community of taggers. If I were to do a Google search for "young people" and "blogging," I'd get results from people that self-categorized their work using the same tags. This organizing system has come to be known as a *folksonomy*, or a taxonomy of the folks.

Like feeds, tagging is relevant to all types of Web content, including photos, videos, blog posts, and bookmarks. Most modern software systems are turning to tagging as a model for organizing content and turning away from the more rigid "foldering" system.

Learn more about tags at
mobilizingyouth.org/tags

Widgets   Widgets go by many names, including gadgets, badges, or modules. They are mini Web pages that can be placed within other Web pages. Your organization can create a widget and ask supporters

to place it on their blogs, Web sites, and social networking pages. Supporters become key partners in promoting your campaign: blog visitors can interact with your organization without ever visiting your Web site.

For example, to conduct a fundraising campaign, create a compelling widget about your cause and ask supporters to put it on their blogs. (Figure 1.3 shows an example.) The donation processing occurs directly in the widget. Your supporters have become the field team that spreads your call to action.

Figure 1.3. A ChipIn Widget for Barbara Davis Center for Childhood Diabetes Embedded in a Supporter's Web Site

Widgets are fairly new and still evolving. They may dramatically reshape the Web by reducing the importance of an organization's Web site. In a "widgetized" future, all interaction with supporters and potential supporters occurs within the widget. An organization's main marketing task becomes persuading supporters to place a widget on their blogs and social networking profiles. Maintaining a robust central Web site becomes a secondary priority.

Learn more about widgets at
mobilizingyouth.org/widgets

How to Get Started

If you're not already familiar with blogging, the logical first step is to start reading and commenting on blogs. Use a blog search engine, such as technorati.com, to find blogs in your field. Read them on an ongoing basis. If you're interested in nonprofit technology, start your search with the tag "nptech." Many nonprofit technology bloggers use this tag to identify their posts. As you read, pay attention to the writing style and the use of comments, blogrolls, tags, and other features specific to the blog software in use. Bookmark favorite blogs or, even better, add them to your feed reader. Get to know the bloggers in your field, and post comments when you can add value to a discussion.

Choosing Blog Software

When you're ready to get started with your own blog, you'll need to choose blog software. First decide if you'd like to operate a standard blog, a community blogging platform, or a feed-only blog. These blog types are described in more detail in the next sections.

Get help choosing blog software at
mobilizingyouth.org/blog_software

Standard Blog

The great majority of organizations operate what I will refer to here as standard blogs, which allow one or multiple authors, comments, and a range of miscellaneous features specific to the blog software. Some people distinguish among standard blogs according to the number of

people who have posting privileges. A blog that allows a single person to post is called a single-user blog, as compared to a multiuser blog or group blog, which allows multiple people to post. Today, most blogs allow either single or multiple authors.

Community Blogging Platform

The Obama example discussed earlier showcases use of a community blogging platform. This software allows your organization to host numerous supporter blogs.

Feed-Only Blog

In this type of blog, you dispense with a Web site and offer information only to feed readers. Practitioners of this approach treat their blog more as a news service than as a space for interaction. The primary advantage of this configuration is that you don't have to spend time designing a blog, responding to comments, or sorting through comment spam. However, you don't gain the advantages of interaction with supporters, search engine optimization, permalinks, or ad revenue. In addition, there is no popular blogging software that supports a feed-only blog. For these reasons, the feed-only blog is not widely used.

Comment Spam

Unless you turn on your blog's comment-approval system, anyone will be able to post a comment. Spammers can then post irrelevant comments with links to their (usually pornographic) Web sites. Turn on your approval system to prevent comment spam, but be sure to approve valid comments quickly enough to keep the conversation flowing.

Other Types of Blogs

You might also hear about video blogs (vlogs) or photo blogs (plogs). As their names suggest, these blogs primarily feature video or photos. Another popular type of blog is a mobile blog or moblog, which is created from mobile phones or devices. Some blogging software is

configured to automatically post text messages and videos or photos sent from mobile phones. These blogging forms are an effort to carve out a niche as bloggers seek ways to distinguish their work. However, they're all variations on the theme of a standard blog, and many standard blogs also feature video, photo, and content from mobile phones.

Finding a Vendor

After determining which blog type is the best fit for your content and community, you'll next need to select a software vendor. Because most blogging software is free (or has a trial period), you can experiment with a few options before making a decision. Take advantage of online blog software reviews, such as those available at Idealware.org. The site lists the following key considerations when selecting blog software:[30]

- Consider whether you need more than a simple blogging tool.

- Decide whether you need to tailor the blog's appearance.

- Determine if someone with technical skills will be available to set up the blog.

- Weigh control and integration versus ease of getting started.

- Consider the technical expertise of the people who will be posting.

Idealware helps you think through each of these considerations and goes on to recommend specific software on the basis of your organization's situation. One of the primary considerations is whether to install the blog software on your own server (installed) or to hire a vendor to host it for you (hosted). Installing your own software will give you more control, but will require technical expertise. For most organizations, hosted blog software will adequately serve needs while limiting expenses.

Optimizing for Search Engines

One of the great secrets about blogging is that it dramatically improves search engine rankings. Search engines take two primary factors into account when ranking results: keyword density and inbound links.[31] Keyword density refers to the number of times a short phrase or word appears in the text of a Web page. An inbound link is a link to your

blog from another Web site or blog. If your organization operates a blog, you'll address both factors without making any special effort. If you post with some frequency, you'll naturally write relevant keyword phrases. If you write interesting articles, people will link to your blog.

By taking a few extra steps, you can *optimize* your blog for search engine "discoverability." Put strategic thought into the keywords that are most relevant to your organization. By developing a list of about fifty keywords and using them frequently in blog posts, you can focus search engine rankings around the topics that attract your supporters. Go one step further by tagging your posts. Be sure to find and use this feature of your blogging software. Grow your inbound links by actively pursuing relationships with other bloggers. Every time you post a comment on another blog, it generates a link back to your blog. In short, your search engine rankings will get better as you become a more active blogger.

Reaching Out to Bloggers

> *Bloggers are not traditional media, so the last thing a PR person should do is create another column on a spreadsheet that includes bloggers in future e-mail blasts.*
>
> *—Church of the Customer Blog[32]*

Bloggers consider themselves unlike professional mainstream journalists. In general, they prefer outreach efforts that demonstrate a personal interest in their writings. To get started, find bloggers with whom you'd like to connect and

- Mention their names on your blog. Most bloggers track mentions of their names.

- Link to their blogs from your Web site or blog.

- Leave comments on their blogs.

- Pitch your story, but

  - Demonstrate that you have read their blogs and that you can offer something of value to their readers.

- ○ Keep messages short and conversational.

- ○ Include a note that indicates that the message is not a form letter.

- ○ Offer a phone number, e-mail address, and Web site URL.

- Understand that e-mail pitches don't work well for reaching top bloggers. Try calling them.[33]

- Give them some bit of exclusive information or inside access.

- Avoid marketing-speak.

- Cultivate a long-term relationship.[34]

- Do all of these things before you have a pressing need. If you're launching a new campaign and want a blogger to write about it, it will help to have this preexisting relationship.

Forum vs. Blog

term

Forum, discussion group, and *message board* are synonymous terms describing software that lists a series of discussion topics. Whereas a blog usually features one or a small group of primary authors, a forum is open to the public. Visitors can submit new topics or respond to existing ones. All topics are treated with equal weight, as opposed to in a blog, where comments are less noticeable than the original post. Forums tend to be more text-heavy, and feature long lists of topics with few images or video.

For a more detailed discussion of the
differences between forums and blogs, see

www.commoncraft.com/archives/000768.html

Strategic Considerations

Blogging might seem to offer a quick path to joining the Web 2.0 movement, but operating a *successful* blog requires strategic planning. The following sections discuss questions and issues that can help you focus your efforts.

Be Authentic

Blogs have come a long way from personal diaries, but, as I've mentioned, readers still expect them to be written in authentic and personal tones. Copy that sounds as if it came from a marketing brochure will not be well received. To connect with young readers, take advantage of the fact that a blog is an *alternative* to marketing materials. It creates a forum for unscripted, dynamic, and personal conversation. Creating personal connections with your supporters is the primary benefit of operating a blog.

Devote Time to Blogging

Setting up a blog takes ten minutes. However, creating a blog that draws readers requires posting frequently, managing comment spam, and making efforts to join the community of like-minded bloggers. Blogging is an ongoing daily project. Maintaining positive blogger relations and regular blog reading, writing, and posting must be scheduled priorities.

Clarify Objectives

What are you trying to accomplish with your blog? The question seems rather obvious, but many organizations start a blog without thinking it through. Explicitly answering this question will help you focus the content and writing style of your posts and the way that you interact with supporters. Here are some possibilities:

- Telling a story that advocates for a candidate or issue

- Connecting supporters with one another

- Creating a space for supporters to express ideas and creative thought

- Conducting market research

- Attracting new supporters

- Reporting news

- Raising your organization's search engine ranking

- Establishing your organization as an expert in the field

- Preparing to respond to timely events

- Supporting a broader campaign

- Showing the impact of your organization

- Fundraising

- Improving internal communication

If the purpose of your blog is to tell a story, for example, your blog is going to look radically different than if you're seeking to improve internal communication. Write a list of objectives and then outline the ways in which the blog will meet those goals.

Tag Smartly

Tags tie a community of bloggers together. You can join the community simply by using tags common to bloggers in your field. Before you begin a blogging project, research tags by looking at the tags in use on related blogs. Develop a list of tags that you'll use frequently. In the Web 2.0 world, tags help define your brand, except that you share and codevelop this brand with fellow taggers.

Integrate Broadly

Consider the ways in which a blog can complement the range of your organization's activities. For example, you can use a blog to enhance communication surrounding a traditional direct-mail piece. Print an exciting lead-in on the mailer and then steer people to a blog post to discuss the topic. Blogs don't have to operate as independent entities—use them creatively to encourage communication.

Release Control

For many organizations, one of the biggest hurdles in starting a blog has nothing to do with software. The obstacle is fear of losing control. Blogging requires a willingness to relinquish some control over branding and messaging. It encourages greater openness and a flattening of organizational hierarchies. It invites constituents to have a conversation not only with your organization but also with *you,* the real people who work behind the scenes. Blogs also ask constituents to converse with each other. They will not always say nice things.

Blogging purists will say that operating a successful blog *necessitates* shifting the very structure of your organization—making it more open, transparent, and responsive to constituents. Certainly, some organizations have used blogging to facilitate these types of changes. Others, such as the Romney campaign, use their blog to tell personal stories around a tightly controlled message. However, even the Romneys embrace a degree of openness. By not deleting controversial comments, they demonstrate a commitment to the spirit of blogging.

The benefits of blogging diminish as you add more controls. When you strip opportunities for social interaction, the blog becomes more like a marketing brochure or advertisement. Before starting a blog, review your objectives. If your organization wants to broadcast a message, create a Web site or run an advertising campaign instead.

See the Big Picture essay by Beth Kanter for more thoughts about this topic.

Participate in the Blogging Community

As I've mentioned elsewhere, when you start to blog, you become part of a community of like-minded bloggers. Your organization undoubtedly has developed expertise in a given field. Think about how you can contribute that expertise to the community. Read other blogs and post comments, and start discussions. When someone posts a comment on your blog, respond quickly to encourage lively conversation. Keep tabs on discussion in your field by running frequent blog searches on relevant keywords.

Challenges and Opportunities

If you're like most nonprofits and smaller political campaigns, you're underfunded, short on time, and still trying to figure out how to make the best use of Web 1.0 technologies, such as e-mail lists and online donations. Blogging seems like a lot of work. It is. Operating a successful blog will require many hours of strategic planning, reading, writing, and interacting with supporters.

However, blogging does not add a categorically new task to your organization's busy schedule. It extends the reach and efficacy of the work that you're *already* doing. Chances are that your organization does some degree of advertising, community outreach, and market analysis. Blogging enhances your ability to accomplish these tasks, particularly for organizations that work with young people.

But blogs also fundamentally shift the nature of these tasks. Consider advertising, for example. The objective of advertising is to promote your organization, candidate, or cause. Currently, you're probably using a traditional advertising model: printing ads in newspapers or magazines, sending direct mail, buying online banners, or maintaining a brochure-like Web site. This form of advertising requires that you craft and broadcast a message that will appeal to your target audience.

Like an ad campaign, blogging promotes your organization, candidate, or cause. You achieve the same end result, but through radically different means. Supporters read your blog, learn about your point of view, and discuss your issues, because the experience is valuable to them. Instead of *targeting* supporters, you *engage* them. Instead of spending time writing taglines and brochures, you spend time in conversation. "Brand building" is not a result of maximizing viewer impressions; it occurs as a result of doing substantive work. You post a well-reasoned and persuasive article, and it generates discussion, which attracts interested people. You learn about the "market" through conversation and comments. You build connections between people who care about your issues. With few financial and technical hurdles, blogging allows you to jump directly to the important work of your organization.

In the upcoming chapters we'll talk about mobile phones, social networks, video and photos, mapping, and virtual worlds. Almost every campaign that uses these technologies also uses a blog. For example, social networks have built-in blogging tools. Virtual world residents actively discuss the evolution of their worlds on blogs. Online video creators post their latest work to their blogs. You'll also see that the technologies supporting blogs, such as tagging, feeds, and widgets, also support many of the other Web 2.0 campaigns. Blogging is the foundation and the glue for many Web 2.0 initiatives.

Blogs also demonstrate many of the concepts that underpin the Web 2.0 movement:

Emergent Behaviors   When a software application is open ended, people invent uses for it that suit their needs. In the examples discussed in this chapter, we saw uses ranging from the delivery of a crafted message, in the case of the Romney campaign, to the formation of a creative space for young trainees, in the case of NOI's organizing efforts. These organizations used similar blogging software, but because it provides a minimum of structure, each organization adapted it to support very different activities. This lesson applies to more than just software. In many of the most successful campaigns in the following chapters, you'll find an organization creating a loose framework that empowers supporters to develop their own meaning and direction. As cocreators, supporters are more engaged, interested, and effective.

The Rewards of Sharing Information   The more you post, comment, and link, the more popular your blog will become. Sustainable advantage in Web 2.0 is not about maintaining control; it's about delivering value to a community over time. The elite bloggers are those who share quality thoughts, information, and analysis most often. Information hoarders and proprietary systems don't do well in the Web 2.0 world.

The Web as a Conversational Medium   Blogging encourages organizations to have conversations with supporters, and supporters to talk with one another. In order to have this dialogue, organizations must be willing to reveal an unpolished and personal side. Marketing messages and advertising campaigns have their place, but blogs are not it. This

unspun quality resonates with young supporters in particular. They appreciate the candor, transparency, and openness that blogs encourage. For organizations, the ability to have these conversations creates new opportunities for making deep connections with supporters.

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Blogging is not without its critics. The most significant criticism is that blogging is created for and by a privileged class. Blogs are written and read by people with Internet access. In theory, anyone can set up a blog in minutes, but in reality, this capability is available only to those privileged with a computer and a network connection. Lack of access excludes millions of people worldwide.

Blogs don't solve the problem of access among the underrepresented. Most of the technologies discussed in this book, in fact, should be understood in this socioeconomic context. However, blogs put the tools of information production in the hands of millions of people who didn't have these tools just a decade ago. Young people can distribute their creative endeavors as widely as Madison Avenue can. Organizations can cost-effectively communicate with Internet-enabled supporters about their ideas, issues, and perspectives.

Blogging is not a cure-all, or even a replacement for traditional tactics, such as advertising. However, it's an alternative that works. The influence of blogging will continue to grow. Many young people blog on a daily basis, and they're becoming more active citizens as they observe life and inject a thought or criticism into the public dialogue. Organizations that learn to navigate the evolving blogosphere stand to benefit from the involvement of this vital cohort.

Endnotes

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4. *The Economist* describes the relationship between the mainstream press and blogging after the Lott episode as follows: "The mainstream media was initially blind to his [Lott's] remarks perhaps because it is used to such comments. But the 'blogosphere'—websites of opinion and news, first known as weblogs—denounced the remarks vigorously, and would not let up, finally forcing others to take notice." "Mississippi Burning," *The Economist,* Dec. 21, 2002, p. 39.

5. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trent_Lott

6. www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP%20Bloggers%20Report%20July%2019%202006.pdf

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11. Thanks to this story for some information about the Romneys' blog: www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/08/AR2007060802781.html.

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14. Unfortunately, Amnesty doesn't release any other metrics that would confirm the efficacy of this blog, such as conversation rates or visitation figures per blog section. This quotation is from a recording from a panel session on human rights blogs, featuring Amnesty: http://archive-c02.libsyn.com/podcasts/880d27015813032ed2eca010f2339ae8/46b41495/netsquared/2Human_Rights_New_Communication_Technologies_BreakoutSession2.mp3.

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25. Thanks to Beth Kanter to turning me on to this example. It's featured
    in her slide show at www.slideshare.net/kanter/bridge-confer
    ence-fundraising-20-session.

26. www.utsc.utoronto.ca/%7Efarrell/blogpaperfinal.pdf

27. www.emergence-media.com/wiki/index.php/Blog_Outreach:_How_
    to_Pitch_Bloggers

28. You may be familiar with content management systems (CMSs),
    which also aim to facilitate Web publishing. Blog software is a type
    of CMS. Most CMSs allow a more freeform organization of content,
    whereas blogging software enforces the reverse-chronological list of
    articles.

29. www.utsc.utoronto.ca/%7Efarrell/blogpaperfinal.pdf

30. www.idealware.org/blogging_software/2006/06/how-to-choose.php

31. Search engine providers protect their search algorithms with an Area 54–like secrecy. Except for a few insiders, no one is exactly sure how to obtain one of the top listings. Dozens of speculative books have been written on the subject, and an industry of search engine optimization consultants attempts to help organizations navigate their way to a top listing. Each specialist offers a combination of science and black art, but most agree that the two factors I've mentioned are critical.

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33. These tips are from Robert Scoble, one of the world's top bloggers: http://radio.weblogs.com/0001011/2005/02/16.html#a9452.

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THE BIG PICTURE

Overcoming the Barriers to Blogging

Essay by Beth Kanter

Beth Kanter is a trainer, social-media coach, consultant, and author of Beth's Blog (http://beth.typepad.com), where she writes about how nonprofits are using social media for social change. Her blog is a veritable treasure trove of information—and was indispensible in writing this book.

Many nonprofit professionals in the United States are thinking about how to integrate blogs and other Web 2.0 tools into their organization's outreach, marketing, and fundraising plans. Some have gone so far as to do a bit of research and experimentation, but they still need to convince skeptical coworkers, board members, or bosses before going any further.

Unfortunately, however, nonprofit leaders frequently run head-first into a number of significant barriers to adoption when undertaking a blogging strategy. These fears can typically be grouped into a few common themes.

Loss of Control Over Messaging and Branding

"What if a blog reader complains about our organization so that everyone can read it? What if their complaint is not based on facts or the truth?"

These objections are by far the most common concerns that keep many organizations from starting a blog. Similarly, they might drive other organizations to turn off the commenting feature on their blog, thinking that this is the best way to control the conversation but ending up only defeating the purpose of blogging.

Truth be told, people are going to complain, and complaints aren't always based on the facts. But isn't it better that you hear from your constituents so that you can (1) address their perceptions directly and (2) use their comments as an opportunity for free market research? Many nonprofit professionals I've talked to feel that the feedback they get from comments on their blog is well worth the possibility of being criticized. Some organizations even measure the return on investment of their blogs by evaluating how many useful business insights the comments generate.

Loss of Editorial Control

Many organizations are used to publishing pieces that go through many layers of editing until the content is perfect. In some cases it may take many months before the piece finally sees the light of day. Compare this to a blog, where the writing is more like a conversation, it's not necessarily perfect, and posts are published rapidly.

Blogging has been dubbed "conversational media." Just as spoken conversations often dispense with perfect grammar and usage, sometimes blogs have typos, awkward phrasings, and errors. But this informal language is authentic, immediate—more *human.* Doesn't your organization want to engage in a richer conversation with constituents?

If certain stakeholders are concerned about making public typos, some blogging platforms offer a draft feature. Organizations can use a tag-team approach in which at least one staff person reviews a post in draft form before it is published.

Too Time-Consuming and Distracting

Blogging takes time to do well. Depending on the scope of the blog, it can take anywhere from four to eight hours or more per week to write, review, and maintain the blog. One way to minimize the time commitment is to share blogging responsibilities among several staff members. This not only spreads out the workload but also helps organizations work across silos. Another approach is to focus instead on "comment blogging"—that is, leaving comments on the blogs of other organizations and writers in your topic area.

If an organization's staff members are writing about their program areas, the discipline of reflecting on a topic every day can help deepen these individuals' subject

expertise. Their blogging work can be viewed as an essential program responsibility, and can in turn provide some important paybacks to the organization, such as enhanced organizational reputation. Some nonprofits look at the blogging process as inexpensive professional development for staff members.

The Ideas Are Too Imperfect

As many seasoned professional bloggers know, they may often "think out loud" or publish a post that is not crystal clear. Someone might read it and leave a comment to that effect, while also providing some clarification. Nonprofits that have adopted blogging take this feedback as a gift that helps them clarify a message and solicit thoughts on an idea before investing more time and resources on implementation. Over and over again, I hear from nonprofit professionals who are blogging that this is one of the key benefits.

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Although all these concerns can be quite real for many nonprofits and, in some cases, prevent them from starting an organizational blog, I've found that the benefits can far outweigh the drawbacks. Blogging can deepen your staff members' expertise in a subject, help you test ideas before they become set in stone (or before you've invested time and resources), and enable a more authentic conversation with constituents.

Web 2.0 and social media tools offer many possibilities for nonprofits to raise awareness of their work, connect with younger donors, raise money, find volunteers, and achieve other tangible benefits. There are challenges, of course, but these can be mitigated with low-risk forms of experimentation and learning in order to reap powerful rewards.

THE BIG PICTURE

The Story of Blogging

Interview with Evan Williams

> Evan Williams seems to know where the Internet is going before the rest of us do. He created one of the first massively popular blogging software applications, Blogger, which was eventually purchased by Google. He went on to found Obvious Corp, which created Twitter—one of the most talked-about Internet sensations. I interviewed Evan in summer 2007. An edited portion of the transcript is presented here.

In the beginning, a lot of content publishing on the Web basically meant, "We have something in print, and we're going to put it on the Web." So newspapers and magazines translated to the Web, and it made a lot of sense because of the advantages in terms of distribution and cost.

But when it came to personal publishing, it wasn't so much an evolutionary matter, because personal publishing wasn't really something that was widely done. Before the Web, there were 'zines and newsletters and different attempts by a very small minority of people to do something in publishing. But the idea of a person actually publishing on a regular basis wasn't established in print, because the medium didn't allow people to do so in a way that made sense for an individual: it was too costly and too time-intensive. When the Web came along and eliminated the cost, however, it still didn't provide the context or the framework in which to do such publishing.

GeoCities was one of the early personal publishing Web efforts. It made it very easy to create a Web page to share your ideas and thoughts, but there wasn't the

mechanism for personal publishing. To use the technical term, there wasn't content management.

Personal publishing and content management came together in the form of the blog. It was one of the first Web-native formats, because you could write something online and publish it instantly. And you could publish multiple times a day if you wanted to, because there's no economic cost. The post could be as short as a sentence or infinitely long, especially once comments came into it.

Traditional print media also don't take advantage of the hyperlink, the core element of the Web. Blogs very much take advantage of the hyperlink, which allows you to write something as short as a sentence or even a word, but link it to something out there in the world and provide context for your view.

Blogging really lets information flow and a billion voices bloom, so to speak. People can tune in to whatever they want. That's powerful.

The Power of Microblogging

Twitter is another tool along the same lines as blogging. I don't know if it will be as profound, but I think there will be situations and uses in which it does something that nothing else can do, based on its real-time and mobile aspects.

Twitter is designed around the now. At any event, be it a concert, protest, or political convention, it gives you the ability to send a message to a lot of people at once, in real time, when they're out and about. You can get your message out to people very quickly and can potentially move people, move crowds, move all kinds of things.

Essentially, Twitter is a way to let people know what you're doing or thinking at any given time, in the moment, and to find out what those you care about are doing. The concept is very simple. You say, "I'm eating at this restaurant." And you send that message via text or via the Web, and those who are interested tune in and know that.

The heart of it is sharing thoughts and feelings in real time, and there's something that's really fun about both sending and receiving. If you're using Twitter, especially if you're using it on your mobile phone, you get these messages from people, and they aren't the type of messages that require a conversation or a reply. They're just an image or an idea sent from someone you may know or from someone you may not know but from whom you're at least interested in getting updates.

A lot of people use Twitter as a sort of a journal to capture moments in their lives for their own use. One neat side effect is that people build a log of all the significant (and lots of insignificant) things that have happened to them over the last year, at exactly the times they happened. Using Twitter builds a personal-life time line.

What I've observed over the last eight years of working on these types of technologies is that people want to share. It's that idea of sharing what's going on in the moment, and receiving messages about what's going on in the moment, that's fun. It plays off our desire to be social and to connect with one another.

As people live more and more of their lives on the Web, it simply can't be a one-way medium. It's just not interesting enough to people. That's why MySpace is the number one trafficked site on the Web. People want to interact. The Web is essentially a social medium. Whereas in the past the Web may have been more about e-commerce, advertising, or the consumption of content, now it's about "socialness." It's hard to think of a Web 2.0 application or anything useful or interesting online that doesn't have a social component.