1 Lost in the Flood: Wired Causes Rise

The images of New Orleans and its neighbors on the Gulf of Mexico were stunning, and they hit America like a sickening punch. Hurricane Katrina formed over the Bahamas, crossed westward over Florida, picked up strength over the warm water of the gulf, and, on August 29, 2005, it roared ashore in Southeast Louisiana. Winds of 125 miles per hour battered the coastal communities, ripping down trees, shredding small buildings, tossing ships from their moorings, and laying waste to broad stretches of the coastline. The winds were devastating.

Then came the water.

Churned by intense low pressure and powerful winds, the storm surge swept over the coast, ripping through the Mississippi cities of Waveland, Bay St. Louis, Pass Christian, Long Beach, Gulfport, Biloxi, Ocean Springs, and Pascagoula.

But Louisiana was even worse. The water overwhelmed the aging and under-engineered flood-control system of New Orleans. The levees failed, and more than 80% of the city flooded. In many respects, one of America's cultural gems, a multicultural city known for its music and its food and its style, ceased to exist.

We all saw the terrible human cost. More than 1,800 people died in Hurricane Katrina, making it the most deadly Atlantic Storm in nearly eight decades. Government failed; indeed, the federal government seemed almost disinterested in the fate of an iconic American city for days, as thousands of people—mainly those too poor, or sick, or elderly to escape the storm surge—were trapped in their homes or in waste-clogged, sickening, makeshift community centers such as the Superdome. Bodies floated down flooded highways or lay bloated on ruined stretches of neighborhood streets. The U.S. Coast Guard began a widespread rescue operation, and gradually aid began trickling into the region. Refugees streamed from the region to shelters to the west in Texas or in the states to the north. Whole neighborhoods were emptied. Hospitals closed. Businesses failed. The population dwindled to half of its pre-storm levels. New Orleans was brought to its knees while a nation watched on television.

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Online, the reaction was frenzied. Political bloggers excoriated the federal government and the response of the Bush Administration, concentrating much of their anger at the President, who seemed slow to react, and the action of his political appointee, Federal Emergency Management Agency director Michael D. Brown. Among liberal-leaning blogs, there was pure fury. The DailyKos, a progressive, large-scale weblog with many authors run by Markos Moulitsas, the U.S. Army veteran and political activist who founded the site in 2002, provided a typical online tableau of grief and anger in the days and weeks after Katrina. It published diary after diary

by writers who were watching cable television news and blaming their national government, and George W. Bush, for a slow response and lost lives. Here is a typical heartfelt and emotional blast of anger from diarist Hunter, published three days after the storm hit, while refugees still awaited food and clean water and bodies still littered the streets:

> We have witnessed two disasters this week. The first was an act of nature. The second was not. The second disaster, still ongoing, is unforgivable.
>
> That's the only word that comes to mind, a word I keep repeating to myself. These deaths, these men, these women, these infants dying now in these hours didn't have to happen. They did not have to die waiting for convoys to gather outside their city or for reservists to stand alongside their shattered police forces. They did not have to wait in darkness and fear for help to arrive, only to struggle for days without that help ever coming.
>
> This is not politics. This is not partisanship.
>
> This is unforgivable.

Thousands of bloggers published thousands of posts about Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans. The shocking video was sliced and diced and redistributed on YouTube, a new video service founded less than five months earlier—and many amateur videographers added their own intense stories to the mix. On Flickr.com, a new photo-sharing site launched just 18 months earlier, photographers posted images of the damage, visual stories in digital still pictures of a dying city. And websites around the country posted links and banner ads to raise money via the American Red Cross and other major national charities.

By December, according the BloggersBlog site, the total number of English-language Katrina blog posts had passed the 500,000-post mark on Technorati. There are over 468,000 posts on BlogPulse and over 900,000 posts on IceRocket.com.

Indeed, the networked online community of Americans lit up with a mixture of shock, concern, disappointment, and anger. There was a palpable feeling, and I remember this quite vividly, that we were all so connected, so empowered by the online medium, so wired for good. Outside of the political ramifications and the issue of blame for governmental failure, the reaction to Katrina was almost as unanimous as the reaction to the attacks of September 11, four years earlier. And yet, in those four years, a new, better-connected Internet had begun to emerge—one that emphasized not an old-style publishing model of merely posting articles and photos and videos, but rather the possibilities of great social partnership among anyone with a connection.

This was Web 2.0, a still-emerging platform of companies, technologies, and communities—and in 2005, a new way of thinking about the Internet as a series of social networks. In the old model, content providers created things for other users to read or watch; it was very like old media moved online, complete with advertising and subscription rates. Group interaction was limited to email lists and bulletin boards, and there was no simple and integrated method for sharing that content—and those ideas.

This new *social web* placed a value on human interaction and an underlying technical configuration that allowed websites and applications to share information—and users to define their own experiences. Wikipedia—the massive, user-generated Internet encyclopedia and itself a Web 2.0 icon—has one of the most concise definitions of this chapter in new media development, which was hitting its stride just about the time Katrina came roiling ashore in August 2005:

> Web 2.0 refers to a perceived second generation of web-based communities and hosted services—such as social-networking sites, wikis, and folksonomies—which aim to facilitate creativity, collaboration, and sharing between users.

Geekspeak aside, people were talking—writing blogs, sharing links, and using tags and keywords to build huge stories and connect themselves and their ideas to the world. Katrina provided the cause, the first large-scale combination of need for assistance and the desire to help, the Web-ready conflagration of compelling stories, angry politics, and the philanthropic case for support.

On my own blog, I railed against government incompetence like everybody else and used the description of one particularly moving photograph—a picture taken by Bruce Chambers of the Orange County Register and widely distributed, reproduced, and tagged by users—to describe my frustration:

> There have been many brilliant, shocking images coming out of the Katrina disaster and its aftermath, and there can be no doubt that the photographers who documented the struggle in New Orleans will see their work praised and rewarded for years to come. But it's more than two weeks since the storm; I didn't expect to be shocked, moved, saddened, angered, and touched deeply by a new photograph. Yet there it was, and even in a middle seat on the shuttle down to DC on business today, pressed in by work and competing elbows, it took my breath away.
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> The picture shows a rescue team emerging from a white, two-family house in New Orleans. A big husky guy in U.S. Army fatigues with the name Ramos on his chest holds the truly emaciated body of a naked, elderly black man. The victim's head lolls back at a strange angle; consciousness does not dwell there. His ribs and breastbone are prominent, and his body is smooth; age appears only in the well-worn hands and the ancient feet. He wears an oxygen mask and is hooked up to an IV drip. The team has taken the time to drape a towel across his genitals. Clearly, the man's life hangs in the balance, but this group of rescuers saw the need for some slight dignity.

Then there is the face of Ramos. It is a powerful face, late 30s I'd guess, going to jowls. A man who likes his cold ones and his football (pure conjecture, but it's my blog). Ramos is hell-bent to save the dying man, that much is clear. All camo fatigues and determination, he is the face of a real Federal response to disaster. His energy is the abundant source of movement in the photo, the complete contrast to the limp, thin victim.

There are others: A woman with a navy shirt that apparently reads New Orleans Medic holds the patient's legs as the group descends some concrete steps. She wears a blue handkerchief on her head, and her brown braids are the only sign of youth and beauty in the picture. Her colleague, a man in dark shades, holds the victim's shoulders aloft. They are local EMTs, supporting the shoulders and the legs of a man being rescued by the Federal response team. A hand with a camouflage cuff, the rest unseen, holds the IV bag.

This is New Orleans two weeks after the flood. Two weeks.

The post started a conversation. Other blogs picked up my description, and the Tattered Coat blog called the photo "the Katrina pieta," a fitting title.

At my blog, frequent commenter Tony Alva (his blogging nom de plume) shot me his thoughts: "We ought to be most thankful that there are people that are motivated to carry out their duty and do it with care no matter what has led them to the point they're at. And perhaps, that we don't forget these people. Maybe we should inspire to be more like them." Tony, I knew from our longstanding but entirely virtual relationship, was about my age, married with kids, and politically more conservative than I am. He did not like the political finger-pointing that dominated much of the blog posts after Katrina and did not hesitate to say so.

Another commenter said it reminded him "of the image of the raising of the U.S. flag on Mt. Surabachi on Iwo Jima." Another called it "Shocking and stirring. All the horror and goodness in one image." The

discourse was tough but generally polite, as it usually is on my blog, where I write about media, politics, sports, and miscellany on a semi-regular basis. It is a personal site, and the discussion reflected the opinions of the small group of regulars whose company I am pleased to enjoy, plus the usual newcomers who find me when a post is highlighted elsewhere. In the vast and horrifying Katrina chapter, it was one small conversation, but it felt important to me, and I felt connected to others, to a wider circle—and in some ways, to a bigger cause.

All around the blogosphere, there were thousands of conversations like this one—some angry, some bitter, some incredibly sad, and many of them moving and vital and personal. To me, the virtual conversation around Katrina was a milestone in the context of social media and public discourse. It transcended the more partisan tone of the first "blogger election" the year before because it brought people together for a cause greater than an electoral triumph. Reading through those posts from the late summer and early fall of 2005 is instructive—they show the power of shared content, linked stories, tagged media, and interconnected conversations. Media expert Mark Glaser wrote an instant coda to the watershed Internet moment in mid-September 2005:

> As the water finally starts to recede in New Orleans, the watershed for online journalism has been laid bare. Hurricane Katrina brought forth a mature, multi-layered online response that built on the sense of community after 9/11, the amateur video of the Southeast Asian tsunami disaster and July 7 London bombings, and the on-the-scene blogging of the Iraq War.

The blogging of Hurricane Katrina also clearly showed the limits of online support for disaster relief. Millions of dollars were directed to the American Red Cross, which many Americans later came to believe did not perform particularly well in the storm's aftermath. The lack of electricity

in the devastated areas kept many amateur journalists from covering the storm or its immediate aftermath. Meanwhile, some of the mainstream media—derided as an article of faith by bloggers—performed heroically, particularly the local press. Nola.com, the large-scale website of the *Times-Picayune* newspaper, became the online ground zero for reports from the city and was cited for its blogging when the paper won two Pulitzer Prizes (one for public service) for its coverage of Katrina. And most of us followed the horrific story on cable television, as that old-time dinosaur of 24-hour news CNN particularly distinguished itself.

Yet, I think Nola.com's role in the Katrina story transcends the old "we report, you read" formula for big news coverage—and it was central to how Katrina played out online, among the blogging community and a world of donors who wanted to help but felt powerless. After Katrina hit, reporters in the field updated the *Times-Picayune*'s blog on a continuous basis. Traffic exploded from about 800,000 page views on a normal day to more than 30 million a day in the aftermath of the disaster. As evacuees scattered north and west of the region, they eventually were able to get their local news from the ongoing blogging at Nola.com. Accepting the Pulitzer, editor Jim Amoss paid tribute to the blog's contributors, "who were integral to everything we published, and made us an around-the-clock vital link to readers scattered across the nation."

Reading just the headlines to Nola.com's blog posts of September 1, 2005, can bring a shiver to the back and a tightness in the throat—there are a mix of posts, some filed by reporters and some by residents:

People Needing Rescue—Thursday A.M.
Diana Puerto Analla in Gretna is missing
Missing sister Thelma Brown
Ellen Thomas looking for family
3–4 adults need help on Jefferson Ave.
Looking for Lakeisha Milligan
Fats Domino okay?

Searching for 6-year-old grandson
Residents trapped at UNO
Tulane Univ Med Center physicians need rescue
Searching for 9 Missing Family Members
Rescue needed at St. Mary of the Angels School
Murders in the Streets

There are dozens more. However, rather than being pinned to trees and lampposts and makeshift bulletin boards—as such pleas were, after September 11, 2001, in New York City—these posts became part of the flow of information out of New Orleans. They were read all over the world, and made their way into news reports and simple blogs posted by the tens of thousands of other bloggers. Nola.com's onsite, open-source, straight-to-the-public model—blending the stunning professionalism of its staff with raw reports from residents—combined with other reports and other photographers and video sources to build a national story that did not go away.

Indeed, the online reports flashed through the blogs so quickly that bloggers were often several steps ahead of the government in understanding the deepening crisis. There were times when the slow and seemingly broken disaster relief mechanisms of federal and state governments and the large relief agencies stood in stark contrast to the lightning-fast distribution of images and stories from the scene. This drove a high level of outrage among the wired classes, from national television anchors to lone bloggers. If they could see, almost instantly, what was happening—and share that information with millions of people online—why was it that the government could not react more quickly? Three weeks after the storm, the blogger who runs the People Get Ready blog wrote about returning to the city:

> The city is a ghost town, or more accurately, a police-state ghost town where the inhabitants are eerily missing, replaced by a militia monitoring the movements of its own members.

It looks like an atomic bomb went off in New Orleans. Cars are strewn around in random ways straddling curbs, on the neutral grounds, some upside down. Skiffs, canoes, pirogues, and even small cruisers were beached. Everything once covered in floodwaters is now covered in an ash-brown dried mud. Anything that was once green is now dead and desiccated, coated in that same ash-brown dried mud.

In areas where significant flooding occurred (even Uptown), cars and houses are striped with grime along their sides—green and brown and ash in color, like dirty rings in a bathtub, or the great strata of millennia at the Grand Canyon, each set of rings telling a story of catastrophic loss. But the rings are everywhere. Across the expanse of entire neighborhoods, the trail of rings can be followed, from one house to the next, from one car to the next, across a fence or a tree or a row of bushes.

I drove into my neighborhood down Jefferson from Claiborne Avenue. A week ago, this area remained flooded with black water and was impassable. Now, everything was bone dry. A barricade on Jefferson Avenue forced me to duck into a side street. Then I continued down Joseph Street. Garbage lined both sides of the street where, obviously, lots of other people like myself had found a way into the city, their destroyed furnishings piled into high mounds on the street. There was litter scattered on the ground everywhere along with downed wires and dead tree limbs.

At each house, as I moved down the street, I looked to see where the water line was. I knocked on almost every one of these doors in the last election cycle as the captain of my precinct for the Kerry campaign. I tried to remember the faces that came to open particular doors, the doors to houses that were cuter than others, or the doors to houses whose yards had been given a little extra attention.

The water line was like a death sentence. For those whose houses were built on slabs or which were only raised marginally on short piers, every furnishing would be found destroyed, and many family heirlooms or irreplaceable objects of sentimental value. And this is just Uptown, which was spared the worst flooding.

I drove just past my house to park in a small clearing of debris in the street. My body's danger mechanisms kicked in as I stepped out onto the street. I felt a thin film of sweat develop, and my heart started to beat faster. The air was humid and filled with that smell of rotting swamp even though the ground was completely dry now.

■■■

In late summer 2005, the concept of online social networks was still a new one. Yet as the informal network of Katrina bloggers showed its reach, the potential of social networks in the cause of helping others showed its power. Photographs appeared on Flickr.com, a photo-sharing service that is now part of Yahoo, and many thousands linked to them, reposted them, and commented on them. Craigslist, the online classifieds provider, carried missing-persons posts and helped refugees find shelter in new cities. More than two dozen sites for people desperately trying to reconnect with friends and family members were launched.

Money was quickly raised. The Austin-based software company Convio, which helps nonprofits communicate with their online communities and raise money, set a single-day record for fundraising on August 31, 2005. Convio customers involved in providing disaster relief services to hurricane victims collectively raised nearly $14 million online—including the American Red Cross, American Humane Association, American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Feed the Children, Navy–Marine Corps Relief Society, Texas SPCA, and UJA Federation of New York.

By mid-September, of the half-billion dollars raised for Katrina relief, $265.1 million came through online donations, reported the Red Cross.

Simply following the "Katrina" tag on Flickr, YouTube, or Technorati brings instant access to an incredible cultural document, a huge trove of reporting and reaction, stories of human triumph and fragility. It is a vast document, one that has never existed before—a document created by millions of Americans, many of them young and totally at home with social media, with leaving a part of themselves in public view. You can call that massive cultural document a *tale*, a *story*, a *web*, or a series of conversations. You can call it a *social network* or a *metafile* or just a very large search result. You can even call it an annotated, hyperlinked epic online *prose poem*.

I would call it a *cause.* To be more specific, it is a souped-up, superwired, socially networked cause—a cultural development that will change how corporations approach consumers, how charities ask people for money, how candidates seek votes, and how ordinary Americans view their place in the world. Many of the people becoming involved in online causes are doing so simply because doing things online is what they know—they have never known an unwired world, a world where you could not change your Facebook photo or your skin or your instant messaging handle at any time.

The bloggers and journalists and "friends" who talked about Katrina online, and took action, and raised money brought an emerging consumer technology trend into sharp focus. They had become *CauseWired*.

What do we mean by *CauseWired*? How far does it reach? Who does it involve, and what does it encompass?

First, let us look at the *cause* part. To me, causes are situations that motivate people to try to change some part of the status quo; causes are, by definition, progressive. They are what drive people to seek change. But I also favor the widest possible definition for the purposes of this study. That change can be fairly conventional—what we have always thought that charities and nonprofit institutions were about: healing the sick, feeding

the hungry, protecting the environment, fighting injustice, educating the young. These areas, at least in the United States, are dominated by established 501(c)3 tax-exempt organizations and religious organizations. Many of these groups have pivoted sharply in recent years and adopted cutting-edge technology in their fundraising and donor-cultivation activities. They realize that as the donor pool gets younger and more open in its connection to causes, they must evolve quickly or be left behind.

Certainly, large nonprofits are part of the story, but they are not the whole story. Unless you have been hiding away from the tumult and national argument, you are undoubtedly aware of the effect that online organizing has had in recent politics. Millions of Americans have signed on as virtual supporters and they have contributed tens of millions of dollars to their candidates; all the while, a new class of activist-journalists drives debate and challenges the mainstream media's view of the national polity from behind the dashboards of their blogs. Then there are the *flash causes*—quick and fast-moving drives to organize people online to take action, in response to a disaster or news story, for example. Finally, there are the social entrepreneurs, a rising class of visionaries that are building online activism into plans for a new generation of change-agent organizations.

What is *wired* about this movement?

Surely, nonprofits and politicians have been raising money online for more than a decade now. (And *wired* just does not cut it in a media landscape so dominated by wireless technology.) Yet, there is something about the current environment that makes wired causes so compelling right now, as opposed to a few years ago. First, *wired* does not just mean the cords attaching your computer to the wall, or the high-speed cable inside that wall and leading out to the street. It means the people on the vast network of networks. Never before have we all been so wired—that is to say, so closely related. Email was the "killer app" of the first decade of the commercial Internet—and it remains a vital connector.

But we've moved well beyond it, to a far more connected Internet. On any given day, I stay in touch with hundreds of people—real friends and Facebook friends—and they keep track of me, through Facebook, via Twitter (a short-messaging service that limits posts to 140 characters), or by subscribing to blog feeds or Flickr feeds or YouTube accounts. That wired (or *wireless*, of course, but it makes for an inferior metaphor) infrastructure of personal interaction and its growth over the last three years creates fertile ground for fast-moving social activism online. It allows for a kind of charitable involvement that is both personal and open to the world, what microfinance pioneer Susan Davis terms "the philanthropy of you."

There is another force in the wiring as well. We are living in a time of widespread experimentation involving causes—call it *social entrepreneurship*, *venture philanthropy*, *social enterprise*, or whatever term strikes your fancy. At its core, this movement favors a tolerance for risk in seeking social change. It is no accident that two of the best models for changing how society engages in philanthropy are web-based, social network-friendly, and highly viral—the microfinance site Kiva.org and the targeted philanthropy enterprise DonorsChoose. The ability to tap vast databases and provide a personal donor or lender experience is at the forefront of online social activism. Together they form what Ben Rattray, founder of the innovative giving portal Change.org, calls "the mega-public," a vast and interconnected army of people who, at least in part, want to change the world.

Technology makes it possible, of course—new protocols and software "hooks" that allow websites to talk to each other, that break down the barriers and silos that held back true online collaboration in the early days. The authors of *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams, describe that model for widespread collaboration:

> Call them the "weapons of mass collaboration." New low-cost collaborative infrastructures—from free Internet telephony to open

> source software to global outsourcing platforms—to allow thousands upon thousands of individuals and small producers to cocreate products, access markets, and delight customers in ways that only large corporations could manage in the past. This is giving rise to new collaborative capabilities and business models that will empower the prepared firm and destroy those that fail to adjust.

Tapscott and Williams, who focus primarily on consumer markets, foresee something of a golden age ("a critical turning point in economic and social history"), and it may well be possible to extend their view of online collaboration to causes. Wikipedia, the massive, free online encyclopedia that is written and edited entirely by its own user community, is emblematic of this possibility. In seven years, that community has built Wikipedia into a strong consumer brand—the fifth highest brand ranking by the readers of brandchannel.com—with over 10 million articles in 253 languages, comprising a combined total of over 1.74 billion words by March 2008. Yet, Wikipedia is itself a wired cause, run by the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a nonprofit organization headquartered in San Francisco. To its most ardent volunteers, Wikipedia is a vital cause, a rallying point for online social activism: "Imagine a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge. That's our commitment," reads the foundation's credo. Wikipedia's 75,000 active users write and edit and check facts—and they support the cause of knowledge using a set of digital tools unavailable a decade ago. They are part of a hidden economy, or "prosumers" as futurist Alvin Toffler calls them—amateur or semiprofessional volunteers and activists, passionate in their work and contributing real value to the greater society. In terms of social activism, they're part of Ben Rattray's increasingly powerful mega-public.

Not to put too fine a point on it, much of that mega-public is young. The headlines and the ubiquitous B-roll footage do not tell a particularly compelling story about the priorities of young people these days.

To the popular press, young Americans are "generation clueless"—millions of selfish, naïve, and coddled starlet types staggering through their lives intentionally blind to the suffering of others, to world poverty, to the great issues of our day. To some degree, this reputation is hard earned.

However, the generalization of a materially obsessed generation masks a vital and important movement—a subtle shift in priorities and aspirations that will have a huge impact on the future of philanthropy. At no point since the student movements of the 1960s have young people worn their causes so openly—but this time around, the Facebook Generation is not fighting the establishment. They own it. For today's superwired, always-on, live-life-in-public young Americans, the causes you support define who you are. Societal aspirations have so permeated the "net-native" population that causes have become like musical tastes, style choices, and "blog bling."

Take Facebook. In less than six months during 2007, its Causes application (a bit of code you can easily add to your online profile) attracted more than two million members, who combined to support tens of thousands of nonprofits and political causes. Causes was created by Project Agape, a for-profit startup backed by venture capitalists in California. The company was co-founded by Sean Parker, a managing partner at The Founders Fund and a co-founder of Napster, Plaxo, and Facebook, and Joe Green, who comes from a background of grassroots organizing, having worked on the ground in political campaigns on the city, state, and presidential level. Causes allows organizations to raise money and gather supporters within Facebook. Said the founders, rather boldly:

> This is a natural evolution of social networking. Leveraging real-world social networks is an important part of activism, fundraising, and political campaigning. This is especially true of grassroots activism, local-chapter style nonprofit organizations, and the walks/runs used by many charities to raise money. Given all this, it's a bit surprising that online social networks haven't been more aggressively leveraged until now.

The money raised did not nearly match the level of involvement at first. Cancer research at Brigham & Women's Hospital, for instance, had attracted more than three million members by April 2008, but they had contributed just over $60,000, or two cents per member. The Save Darfur coalition had more than 840,000 members and $16,000 in donations, or the same two cents per member. One of those members was my teenage daughter, and many of her friends have joined the cause as well. They may not be raising huge sums, but they've made the cause of aiding victims of African genocide part of their public lives, and they're not shy about telling others or signing them up. Her old man may work in the philanthropic sector and have a decent understanding of the trends, but I suspect that my daughter and her friends will create a philanthropic future that's very different, indeed.

Sites such as Kiva, MySpace, LinkedIn, DonorsChoose, Change.org, and Facebook hold the promise of connecting social entrepreneurship with mass markets of consumers—of linking the motivation behind philanthropy with the aspiration to bring about change. The result may change how developed societies come to view charity and causes—particularly as young people begin to "wear" their causes as public manifestations of their personalities, like clothing and music.

Recent announcements of philanthropy initiatives on sites as diverse as buttoned-up professional network LinkedIn and the freewheeling MySpace, where members will be invited to help battle malaria, show that social-network members ranging from geeked-out middle school kids to resume-swapping career-climbers are all adding the charitable impulse to their digital profile building. Beyond the social networks, there's also a growing recognition that philanthropy and social causes can be a rewarding career path. At onPhilanthropy.com, where I'm the publisher, a group of young professionals has formed Future Leaders in Philanthropy (FLiP, as we call it), a "mashed-up" community that includes a blog, a Facebook group, and in-person networking events. More than 2,000 people have signed up, subscribed, or attended a happy hour to discuss their careers in the sector.

Jean Case is CEO of the Case Foundation, which she created with her husband, Steve, founder of America Online and one of the nation's pioneers in the media technology business. The Case Foundation is heavily involved in priming the pump for online causes, getting more people involved and keying activism. She talks regularly about the optimism she feels about the younger generation of activists, noting that almost half the world's population is under 25. Many are getting deeply and personally involved in causes in a way that has never happened before. "We are seeing such a huge opportunity to engage individuals at all levels," she said, at the Wealth & Giving Forum in 2007, an annual gathering of family foundations. "And this space has not yet been fully tapped. Social networking opens up exciting opportunities to bring people together and to define themselves by what they care about. . . . I think we'll look back at philanthropy as this quaint time when rich people wrote checks and we'll be living in a time when philanthropy is part of everyday life."

Causes matter to today's consumer. Causes matter to companies, they matter to stock prices, and they matter to sales and brands. A 2007 survey conducted by cause-marketing company Cone Communications found that 83% of Americans say companies have a responsibility to help support causes, and 87% would switch from one brand to another if the other brand is associated with a good cause. But I believe that the *net-native generation* is also applying this principle to individuals, including themselves. The concept of a personal brand is everywhere. It turns out Andy Warhol had it wrong, probably because he was commenting on an era dominated by TV networks and tabloids—an era that has passed. We will not all have our 15 minutes of fame; we will have lifetimes of slight notoriety within our personal networks, some small, some large. And one factor in how we rank is our public support for the causes that are close to us. It is easy to see how today's young workers want to bring their causes with them to the office. This is a growing professional field. Even in other fields, doing well and doing good are becoming ever-more intertwined.

American philanthropy nears $300 billion a year, holding steady at around 2% of GDP. Of that, the confluence of the net natives and online donations is a tiny ripple in a vast ocean—estimated at between $6 and $8 billion at the most.

I believe that will change. The combination of what the next generation expects and what it has access to will change the nature of philanthropy and giving and causes. It is often observed by fundraisers that the Baby Boomers heading toward retirement and asked to make contributions to causes expect two things: personal involvement and results. You can see that both in the explosion of 501(c)3-registered organizations and in foundations. The trend-watchers tell us that writing a check isn't good enough for many of today's major donors. This is driving innovation in information sharing and communications. Sites promoting acts of generosity and kindness, such as Kiva, DonorsChoose, ChangingthePresent, Global Giving, Razoo, Social Actions, DoSomething, Karmadu, Change.org, FirstGiving, and WorldChanging.com, and the philanthropic efforts of social networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, Friendster, MySpace, and many others are making the public adoption of causes part of the social-networking experience.

The central thesis of this book is very simple: New technology and the human urge to communicate will create the basis for a golden age of activism and involvement, increasing the reach of philanthropy and improving the openness of politics, democratic government, and our major social institutions. Whether that golden age materializes and becomes a force for great change will be largely dependent on how well that technology is used, how open the network remains, what voices rise to lead its movements, and whether the increasing onslaught of digital communications turns out to be a tool for good or an abstraction of entertainment and frivolity. In short, the public commons is changing; it is being rewired and supercharged with the powerful fuel of information and instant conversation. What happens on that new digital commons over the next quarter century will be the legacy of those who gather there.

I wrote, back in 1995 (for the online newsletter @NY, which Jason Chervokas and I created that summer), that the Internet is not a mass medium—it is a medium of the masses. There is no Super Bowl Sunday online, and no CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite as in the America I grew up in, where up and down the street each living room glowed with families watching the same news on the same television program at the same time. From the moment in the middle 1990s when the Internet became a vast consumer medium, that programmed nirvana of one event, one massive audience, one huge shared experience evaporated like the morning mist over the water in late summer. With few exceptions, the era of singular experience ended as America Online carpet-bombed dialup disks across the landscape and Netscape downloads spun the server meters to infinity.

Day by day, minute by minute, on whatever device in whatever setting we find ourselves colliding with media these days, our experiences are all different. No two people enjoy the same path to information, to entertainment, to communication.

The social web rallied after Katrina, spontaneously at first as people connected around the news story, and then more formally. Three years later, Katrina and its aftermath remains a wired social cause. Looking back along the many blog posts, public photographs, uploaded videos, user comments, and feed tracks, you can see a vast cause coming to life online—a cause that transcended geography and race and age.

The devastation left by Hurricane Katrina, physical and social, is still prominent in the CauseWired world. Three years after the storm, there are dozens of online efforts to raise money for the storm's victims and to help New Orleans regain its footing. It is a sign of Americans' generosity and desire to help; but it is also a signal of just how easily a wired cause can permeate the consumer consciousness and become part of how we interact.

Type "support hurricane Katrina" into Google, and you get more than 600,000 results—links to organizations aiming to help those left homeless

and a community still damaged by the storm. Many are sponsored results, either paid advertisements or links donated to nonprofits by Google, which maintains a large program to donate traffic to causes. They include links to Network for Good, the online donation center for nonprofits; OxfamAmerica, the spinoff of Europe's largest antipoverty organization; the Urban Institute, which is studying the rebuilding of New Orleans; the Phoenix of New Orleans, a nonprofit organization devoted to rebuilding and recovery of the centrally located Lower Mid-City neighborhood; the brilliant Squandered Heritage site by community organizer Karen Gadbois, who is determined to preserve historic homes under repair from demolition by overly aggressive public agencies; and Friends of New Orleans, a nonprofit that says it is "looking for a million friends to declare their support for New Orleans and surrounding parishes."

On Facebook, the Hurricane Katrina Relief Foundation cause had more than 1,110 members. It was created by a high school student in New Jersey (not the Foundation itself, just the Facebook cause) whose class went on a mission trip to the stricken city. On the cause's main page is a YouTube video that shows a series of slides taken on the trip in St. Bernard Parish and parts of the Lower Ninth Ward. And on YouTube, the student's amateur video got this response from a New Orleans resident: "Thanks for the video. I will soon be moving back to N.O. It seems as though most of the United States has long forgotten New Orleans. We don't really want pity or money from you, just don't forget about us. May none of you ever have to experience anything such as Katrina in your lives."

■■■

Years after Katrina came ashore, the social web still connects people who were hurt with people who want to help. The immediate response to the disaster was a terrible failure, a national object lesson in neglect, poor policy, and cultural disconnections. But the CauseWired community still

connects, still raises money, still keeps its eye on New Orleans, and still considers the rebuilding of the city and the lives of its residents an important, national (even international) cause.

One small corner of this large, interconnected cause was a site called Hellicane, a blog dedicated to poetry about Hurricane Katrina. It still collects poems about the storm, or about the people of the Gulf, but as I linked back across the Katrina-inspired social network, which touched millions and raised millions, I came across one bit of verse that seemed to me to stand for the billions of connect bytes and the people who came together online and off. It is part of a poem by Jill Eisnaugle, called "Time of Greatest Need":

> Even when the worst is finished
> And the toll has last been known
> Kindness shall not be diminished
> And you'll never walk alone