

DO SOCIAL MEDIA RENDER CIVIL SOCIETY “MEMBERSHIP” OBSOLETE?

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NEARLY EVERY REGISTERED NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION IS HEAVILY IMMERSSED in figuring out how to use or harness social media to strengthen and promote itself and its work. In the frenzy to latch onto these new forms of communication and linkage, and given the pace at which these new media are developing, organizations may not be conscious of the implications of social media for how they are structured and operate, or of the changes social media are bringing in their wake.

The new media may be leading or reflecting the attitudes of the generation most comfortable with them, challenging traditional notions of membership, and finding new ways to engage and contribute to organizations and the purposes they serve. But can they provide the benefits that have historically flowed to an organization from its members, including financial and other supports, strengthening its advocacy activities and messages, and legitimizing the organization through their prestige or numbers?

A research institute on participation in Asia reported in 2008 that “Modern civil society organizations expect individuals to ‘join’ an association. The modern meaning of association is membership. In many modern civil society organizations, therefore, criteria and methods of recruiting members, services to members, and ways of securing contribution from members are clearly laid down.”¹

In a Canadian context, many voluntary sector organizations are incorporated and/or registered charities. While membership may be part of the legal structure of such organizations, it is not required in legislation or regulation. Self-perpetuating boards of directors are sufficient, where board members decide who fills any vacancies.

It can be argued that in the not-too-distant past, membership served an organization in a number of other ways. Members paid fees, even in organizations that did not provide any direct service or direct benefit in return for membership. Even today, although there are often tensions between the revenue generation benefits of membership fees and increasing membership by keeping fees affordable or modest, fees are an important part of the revenue stream for many organizations.

In the era of direct-mail fundraising, members were added to the list of potential donors to be solicited for funds over and above fees to support the organization to which they “belonged.” After all, if your members wouldn’t write a you cheque, who would?

After more than 20 years of involvement with the voluntary sector and a long-standing passion for using technology to support and build the sector, HAVI ECHENBERG welcomes this focus on the sector and its technology. Havi spent 17 years as an independent consultant working with government and non-government organizations on social policy and public affairs before becoming an analyst with the Library of Parliament, where she works in the Social Affairs Division of the Parliamentary Information and Research Service. Email: havi@havidave.com

Membership could signify more than a revenue stream, however. It could also demonstrate a commitment to the organization that went beyond fee payment. Members are often part of a governance structure, at least in theory, with the opportunity to vote in board elections and perhaps to help develop or comment on an organization's programs and/or policies. While most "members" of most organizations never attend a meeting or respond to any requests for comments or suggestions, the opportunity to do so may be important to some members and to some organizations.

Members are also called upon to volunteer, whether in service delivery (think of Big Brothers or Brownies), in fundraising activities (think of volunteers at a gala), or in advocacy (think of attending a vigil or participating in a marathon). Direct involvement may be more common in local organizations, many of which could not survive without the volunteer labour provided at least in part by members.

Members also contribute to an organization's legitimacy. Either the volume or quality of members, or both, can be an important indicator to others (especially donors, private or public funders, and those an organization might try to influence) of how seriously to take an organization.

Whether it consists of celebrities, academic heavy-hitters, or former elected officials, a membership list can signify that important people take an organization seriously enough to join it. Being able to identify a large and specific number of members (with "large" varying with the scope and reach of the organization) can also signal that an organization speaks for a broad group of stakeholders, or that others share and support the views being put forward by an organization.

From the members' point of view, signing up (becoming a "card-carrying member") signifies not only adherence but also commitment to the organization and the causes to which it is committed. Membership entails fees, usually in return for some benefits (publications, etc.) and a voice in running the organization. It has a tangible form and is usually annual, with reminders in the mail about the need to renew.

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA CHANGE ALL THAT

Voluntary organizations operate in a new and evolving world. With pressure on funding from private and public funders, as well as declining numbers of volunteers and declining numbers of individuals claiming tax benefits in return for donations to charities, these organizations are being forced to find new ways to sustain themselves and their work.

At the same time, it is clear that the voluntary sector is getting older, with fewer young volunteers and members, and an aging donor base. As the baby boom generation ages out of paid work, there are hopes that they will fill their new-found free time with involvement and participation in voluntary organizations. Yet most organizations recognize that without the engagement of younger people, the energy and life-blood of their efforts will diminish over time, and that they will lose touch with those who are both most in need and have the most to offer.

Like many institutions, many voluntary organizations find themselves trapped between centuries. With financial supporters, staff, and volunteers who were raised and came of age in the 20th century, these organizations are now challenged to attract, engage, and retain people who were raised or are coming of age in the 21st century. Although only eleven years into the current century (or ten, depending on how you count it), we know the generation divide when we see it. While the 20th century generation is coming to terms with the Internet and the need to develop and maintain websites, maybe even interactive ones, the 21st century generation is abandoning computers and websites in favour of using mobile devices to communicate with each other and the world, and to receive all the information they choose to receive, and no more.

At the same time, American research on Generation Y (people currently in their 20s) found that they donate an average of \$341 annually, that 29% made their donations online in the previous year, and that more than a third had joined a charity's online social network in the previous month.² The same study showed that a higher proportion of this generation had made a charitable donation than had those in older generations. A website targeted to Generation Y, called Cool People Care, offers short articles (99 words) with tips on how to make a difference, local events that people can attend to benefit their communities, and merchandise for sale with proceeds going to other good causes.

WHAT IS AN ORGANIZATION TO DO?

To start with, an organization can reconsider how social media can serve the purposes that used to rely on membership, given that 21st century youth and adults are less likely to join and be loyal to an organization over time but may be more likely to support its cause with time, money, and energy.

Let's run through the benefits that have accrued from membership in the past and consider whether there are 21st century social media-based ways to accomplish the same goal, bringing the next generation along with you.

While recent evidence suggests that there are fewer donors to charitable organizations, this does not automatically translate into fewer donations or even less money being contributed. Younger people may not see or receive tax benefits from charitable receipts, as their incomes are lower and their tax burden likely to be less. They may be donating to causes other than registered charities. And they have many ways to do so besides writing a cheque to a registered charity. While many organizations have "donate" buttons on their relatively static websites, those who plan to donate to a charitable cause may by-pass those websites, even while they rely on the Internet for information and convenience in their decision-making and their contributing.

Amid the concern that the new media are conducive to donors by-passing organizations and going more directly to the causes or ultimate recipients, there are a number of initiatives that cast a wider net to direct donations to existing organizations. In Canada, a new charitable organization called Canada Helps was created "to provide accessible and affordable online technology to both donors and charities in order to promote – and ultimately increase – charitable giving in Canada," according to its website. For a fee of between 4 and 5 percent of the donation to any registered charity, Canada Helps will

provide a charitable receipt to the donor and pass on the remaining 95% or so of a donation through electronic funds transfers to any registered charity.

Another entity, the Humanitarian Coalition, brings donors through the door of a particular event, in this case, international human disasters, rather than to a specific organization. It provides CARE Canada, Oxfam Canada, Oxfam-Québec, and Save the Children Canada with a single voice and provides a “one-stop-shop” for all Canadians who wish to respond to an international humanitarian disaster, according to its website.

An additional example of raising funds without members is the Small Change Fund, which invites proposals from charities for local projects that need support in the form of modest donations of time and money. Proposals are reviewed by advisors, and some are posted on its website, where visitors can learn about them and donate their time or money. The Small Change Fund describes its role in making giving simple: “We use the power of the Internet to engage everyone at their own level to share with others. We open up the giving process so you can have a hand in solving the problems you care about most. You read, you choose, you give. You can give money, you can give time, you can give support. It’s that simple.”

The new media allow and promote very different forms of commitment and adherence. While there are some who describe social-media-based commitment as “clicktivism” rather than “activism,” there are some prime examples of how the two can overlap. “Clicktivism” (whereby a well-phrased email can be broadcast to thousands of supporters who can with one click send it on to whomever they please) is accused of being marketing-based and lacking in higher motivations: “Gone is faith in the power of ideas, or the poetry of deeds, to enact social change.” At the same time, others see more hope in the evolution of “electronic activists.”

Whether it’s the tale of Barack Obama’s amazing election campaign recruitment strategies using social media, or the emergence of Avaaz, which claims more than 6-million members in 162 countries who have undertaken more than 28 million “actions” since January 2007, or what was described as an “online uprising” triggered by a Facebook group against prorogation, it is clear that commitment to causes is being demonstrated in ways that by-pass organizations using social media.

Some of the examples above also demonstrate the legitimacy of particular “causes,” though not of particular organizations that advocate on behalf of those causes on an ongoing way. While this can be good news to those seeking volunteers, money, and commitment for their common cause, it will not be good news to those seeking to sustain their organizations. Formal organizations in the traditional mold will find themselves forced to reinvent themselves in fundamental ways, if they are to thrive in the age of the new social media.

NOTES

1. Society for Participatory Research in Asia. (2008). *About Civil Society*. URL: http://www.worldbank.org.kh/pecsa/resources/16.understanding_civil_society_eng.pdf [February 22, 2011].
2. Vinay Bhagat et. al. (2010, March). *The Next Generation of American Giving Whitepaper*. URL: <http://www.convio.com/files/next-gen-whitepaper.pdf> [February 22, 2011].

WEBSITES

Avaaz. URL: <http://www.avaaz.org/en/about.php>

Canada Helps. URL: <http://www.canadahelps.org>

Facebook. URL: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=260348091419>

The Humanitarian Coalition. URL: <http://www.thehumanitariancoalition.ca/index.php/site/about>

New York Times. URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/business/media/10carr.html?_r=2

Orion Magazine. URL: <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/3221>

Small Change Fund. URL: <http://smallchangefund.org/global/what-we-do>

The Tye. URL: <http://thetye.ca/Mediacheck/2010/01/11/PaulsenProrogue>