briefing

Development online: making the most of social media

Nearly one third of the world's population is online. Once the domain of static, written information, the web now provides a host of multimedia and social media designed to encourage interaction and networking. These are changing the way we live and work, reshaping the way knowledge is controlled and created and challenging traditional business models and powerbases. For the development sector, they offer opportunities to encourage diversity, give marginalised people a voice in decision making and mobilise civil society to effect change. Exploiting those opportunities requires us to develop new communication strategies that help users find the information they need and ensure we engage in real dialogue; and to rethink the relationship between individuals and institutions.

Policy pointers

- Web 2.0 technologies such as wikis, blogs, social networks and social bookmarking support a vocal and connected society and have significantly increased the potential for professional engagement and collaboration.

- Development organisations will need to rethink their communication strategies to reflect and support new ways of working.

- To keep trust in the global community, these organisations will have to engage in real dialogue — both listening and contributing to key online debates.

- The increasing value of individual identities, or personas, online has the potential to impact organisations' external reputations.

The web is a relatively new, but fast-evolving, communication technology. Internet World Stats estimates that the number of people online has grown fivefold over the past decade to reach 1.96 billion.[1] First used mainly to publish written information, the web now offers a host of multimedia and social media that have enabled a move away from static web pages towards interactive content and networking.

The statistics are sometimes conflicting but always compelling. Every day we send more than 32 billion emails (excluding spam) and 140 million 'tweets', watch more than 2 billion videos on YouTube, upload more than 98 million photos to Facebook and write nearly a million blog posts. Yahoo collects 10 terrabytes of information — the equivalent of the contents of the US Library of Congress[2] — every day and Google receives tens of thousands of search queries every second.

How we access this information is changing too. In 2010 the number of mobile broadband subscriptions exceeded one billion.[3] Globally, we have reached five billion mobile phone subscribers — and 92 per cent of new phones come with an internet browser.[4] Bandwidth is increasing and fibre optics are coming. Facebook reports that more than 250 million of its users access its website through their mobile devices — and that these people are twice as active online as non-mobile users. This is a very connected world.

Changing practices

The explosion of online activity is changing the way we work. Web 2.0 has already ramped up the potential for professional engagement and collaboration — for example, more than 100 million people are signed up to the business-oriented social networking site, LinkedIn. And a growing number of researchers are using social bookmarking tools such as Connotea to organise and share key documents and references.

Web 3.0, or the semantic web, will create intelligent data for different users — for example, reminding you to take a relevant paper to a conference you are going to. This revolution is not a fad — this generation may adopt it first[5] but other generations are increasingly joining in.[6]

Those of us with high bandwidth internet — South Korea, for example, which has a bandwidth ten times higher than the United Kingdom — are spending our time differently. People are engaged in 'connected cocooning'[7] — answering problems on forums and interest groups, they are working to solve the world's scientific problems, co-creating open source software and taking part in the full range of crowdsourcing activities, socialising, gaming, and so on.

Power to the people

This revolution is changing how knowledge is created and controlled, challenging traditional business

The web revolution provides new pathways to empowerment

models and upsetting long-established powerbases. We used to rely on trusted communities of practice to produce and filter information for us — the academic community with its peer reviewed journals, the medical community with its access to information on drugs and treatments and the media with its access to daily news and key opinion formers.

It was a 'filter then publish' world[8] where others decided what we should have access to and we chose which filters to subscribe to depending on our tastes and areas of expertise. But now there is a 'publish then filter' dimension. Before, only those with printing presses or broadcast mechanisms could disseminate information — now the web has enabled thousands of individual commentators to communicate directly with others through wikis, blogs or instant message services. Wikipedia, with its team of more than 100,000 active volunteer editors, is a recognised example. The speed with which such communication can happen has also rapidly increased (see Going viral).

Communities of practice are still trusted but they face more direct competition. Other people's experience can become research, people read up on drugs online and self medicate and people make their own news rather than read newspapers. A Technorati survey of the blogosphere last year noted that nearly half (48 per cent) of bloggers believed that over the next five years, more people will get their news and entertainment from blogs than from traditional media.[9]

Perhaps most importantly — especially to those in the development sector — the web revolution provides new pathways to empowerment.

There are many excellent examples[10] of how people, individuals and communities have used new web platforms and technologies to influence the outcome of a situation that just a few years ago they would have been powerless to affect. From a ten year old boy raising £120,000 relief funds for Haiti by cycling around his local park or amateurs measuring craters on the surface of Mars, to throwing the spotlight on political unrest during the Kenyan elections, or the New York investment banker capturing images of the newspaper seller Ian Tomlinson just before he died during the G20 protests in London April 2009[11,12] — the examples are various and uplifting.

Join the revolution

This is welcome news for many organisations in the voluntary sector who have long resisted top-down, centralised, bureaucratic models in our own institutions. The way people are using Web 2.0 mimics our desires to encourage diversity, to let everyone have a voice, to mobilise people around common interests and to put more pressure on institutions to make change happen.

What we have been striving for in terms of promoting a vocal and engaged society is now a reality for the global North and has huge potential for the global South — we have the tools to work together to make a real difference. Six years ago, the Center for the Digital Future said that people already believed that they can influence politics by communicating and engaging online — and there is growing evidence to support this.

But if this new online world throws up opportunities, it also poses threats to us as individuals, communities and organisations. We are visible targets — our faiths, allegiances and affiliations are easy to track down. The new wave of commentators can be malign as well as altruistic — our credibility can be undermined, our secrets revealed.

Finding the time and resources to manage our online presence effectively can also pose a real threat. We risk wasting valuable resources if we do not understand where and how our key audiences are using the web. But if we fail to engage, our organisational reputations become vulnerable to critics who see us as unwelcoming to innovation and new generations of thinkers. And we expose ourselves to unknown assault — if we are not listening online, we cannot know what is being said to or about our organisations.

Crafting an appropriate response to the ever-changing world of global connectivity and collaboration requires us to act in four main areas: signposting, engaging in dialogue, strategic planning and persona development.

Supporting the search for information

Vast flows of information move like magma over the web. You have your 'hot,' fluid information racing to targeted destinations, your cooler, solid information

Going viral

It doesn't take long for news to spread through social media, and there is much larger potential for information or tools to 'go viral' and become extremely popular in a very short amount of time. A notable example are the videos of British pensioner Peter Oakley, more commonly known as 'geriatric1927'. In just one week after publishing his homemade autobiographical videos on YouTube in August 2006, Oakley became the most subscribed user on the site. His first video has been viewed nearly three million times.

More recently, only twelve hours after the news of Osama Bin Laden's death first broke, the social media monitoring company Sysomos found more than 40,000 blog posts and news articles about the event, as well as more than 2.2 million tweets. Within one hour of President Obama delivering his speech on the death, there were already more than half a million tweets and nearly 2,000 blog posts and news articles about the subject.

being archived, and a mass of lukewarm material oozing through the spaces and unpredictably spreading out through a myriad of connections.

There is so much information out there. For individual users, a lot may be useful, interesting and intriguing. But even more is probably pointless, uninteresting or irrelevant. With more than 255 million websites providing information in a huge number of different formats and languages, how do people make sense of what's available?

Traditional filters may be less powerful, but there is still huge potential in adopting a filtering role. Wikipedia again provides a good example. Despite the hundreds of thousands of active contributors, the site still relies on a very small number of people — an 18-strong 'arbitration committee' — who ensure rules are adhered to and are a key factor underpinning the site's tremendous success.

The key lies in building trust in your ability to point users to the most accurate and relevant information they need, when they need it.

Engaging in a real dialogue

Online conversations and collaborations include many more contributors than those held through traditional media. Anyone can contribute to debates, start forums, write blogs, make films, upload photographs. What starts as opinion can quickly become 'fact' as other users adopt ideas, numbers and strands of thinking and redisseminate them. To be respected in this environment requires engagement.

On the one hand, this means listening to what relevant audiences have to say — especially as more and more communities and individuals from the global South begin expressing their priorities more directly through the mobile broadband. It also means being open and willing to receive criticisms and correct misunderstandings, and to debate and dialogue with those holding different opinions.

At the same time as listening, we must actively contribute to the growing number of relevant debates and communities online. If broadcast media was about amplifying ideas, Web 2.0 in general, and the blogosphere in particular, is more about a dialogue or conversation. To be credible in this world, organisations must write their own blogs, comment on other peoples in real time and build new partnerships to co-create knowledge in a more spontaneous, informal way.[13]

New strategic thinking

The traditional communications channels will not go away but communication strategies will need to change to incorporate the new ways of working enabled by Web 2.0 and the semantic web.

Social media in times of crisis

Social media is playing an increasing role in supporting efforts to cope with natural disasters. In the aftermath of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan, tools such as Facebook and Twitter have helped raise money for relief efforts but both also provided a vital line of communication during the crisis itself.

At one point, the Twitter use in Tokyo reached 1,200 tweets per minute according to Tweet-O-Meter. Not only did it provide the latest news but, with most of the phone lines out of action across Japan, it was also one of the only sources of communication with people in the country, along with Facebook and Japan's social networking site, Mixi.

People are playing online with new found freedoms and opportunities but in time different communities will choose favoured platforms and applications. The profile on Twitter is already changing — what started as a microblogging service has grown into much more than a tool to type in quick status updates.

Developers — both professional and amateur of all ages — are launching thousands of applications every day to make our online life more accessible and easier to manage — from organising individual feeds to personal browsers such as Tweetdeck, to managing bookmarks, blog subscriptions, photos and so on. Designing your own filters and ways of viewing RSS feeds through composition tools such as Yahoo Pipes is moving us forward into the semantic web.

As professional communicators we will need to know how to use all of these tools to target our key audiences. Africa is Facebook's fastest growing market — in many parts of the continent, user numbers have more than doubled in the past year. Many development organisations can increase their impact by resourcing the development of new skills for using these tools — for building online communities, writing and maintaining blogs, and identifying and supporting relevant marketing activities both online and offline. Many will also need to make more spaces within their own web environments for people to join in, comment and share. Similarly, they will need to create spaces for their own staff and networks to exchange knowledge and boost internal learning.

It has never been more important to recognise that longer documents are penalised in this medium. There is evidence that the web is improving people's ability to make snap decisions and filter large amounts of information.[14] It is teaching us high-speed research skills — how to read and sift information fast. Many people spend two seconds or less on any particular website before moving on[15] and 40 per cent of searchers never return to the same webpage.[16]

Reconciling individuals with institutions

If the web revolution will make us rethink our communication strategies, it will also require us to

rethink the relationship between individuals and institutions. In real life, societal allegiances have traditionally been organised around group structures including families, organisations and institutions. These have given individuals places to hide, to coast through life passively should they choose. Social media networks are organised around the individual. It is harder to opt out of active engagement because our lives are documented, labelled and monitored on the web whether we like it or not.

With every free transaction online we unknowingly donate a mass of data.[17] Every email conversation is stored and analysed. Every search made is logged, every purchase recorded. Every web cookie and every click builds up a profile of our behaviour and interests. Aside from the obvious marketing and policing potential, this focus on us as individuals encourages us to develop other online identities.

Up until now, most organisations have tried to subsume the identities of their staff. But the web increasingly helps us cultivate our individual online professional profiles through platforms such as LinkedIn that provide daily updates on our status and associate us not only with our current paid positions but also with other interests, contacts and previous experience.

And these individual identities are increasing in value. People have always subscribed to people — peer recommendation and word of mouth have long been the most effective way of spreading information.[18] But the new web technologies increase the power of those connections and challenge traditional organisations such as media houses. Instead of browsing well-known general interest publications such as newspapers, readers are now more likely to go to particular writers, bloggers or trusted sources through targeted searches.

For organisations, this development of the individual persona can present a challenge. Do you monitor how and where your staff are representing themselves and, by association, your organisation? We are already seeing a growing trend in simultaneous presence — sitting in a meeting offline while posting 'live' tweets or blogs online. Will the future see the development of organisational avatars that represent our institutions online while our own identities are also present elsewhere?

This development of individual personas will also impact internal decision making. As people increasingly share and work together in everyday life, they will expect their employers to provide more open and collaborative spaces too.[19] New generations of employees will expect to be included in decision making through open dialogue as things happen. They will expect to work across internal and external divides and to co-create content and ideas.

For those of us working in development it is an exciting time. But the new opportunities presented by this increasingly connected world does not mean change in itself — we still have a long way to go to ensure a fairer planet in terms of poverty alleviation. We must remember that despite all our progress towards the Millennium Development Goals over the past decade, the bottom billion remain the bottom billion.

But one thing is clear: this revolution is here to stay. We cannot simply choose to ignore it — rather, it is beholden on us to know and understand the potential of this powerful channel and to be innovative in how we use and engage with it.

■ **LIZ CARLILE**

Liz Carlile is director of communications at IIED (www.iied.org/general/staff/liz-carlile).

Notes

■ [1] See Internet Usage Statistics. www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm. ■ [2] Stuart, M. 2010. *What hasn't happened yet: the shape of digital to come?* Chartered Institute of Marketing Shape the Agenda Issues. ■ [3] The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) ■ [4] Stephane Boyera, World Wide Web Foundation ■ [5] Jue, A.L. *et al.* 2009. *Social Media at Work.* Jossey-Bass/Wiley. ■ [6] For example, in August 2009, Tom Gater of Futerra Sustainability Communications reported that 57 per cent of Facebook users were women and the fastest growing segment of users were 55–65 year old females. ■ [7] A phrase coined by MTV for a change in the way people are using their time. ■ [8] Shirky, C. 2008. *Here comes everybody.* Penguin. ■ [9] Sobel, J. 2010. State of the blogosphere 2010. Technorati. See www.technorati.com/blogging/article/state-of-the-blogosphere-2010-introduction ■ [10] A recent HIVOS Knowledge Programme report *Digital Natives with a Cause* highlights many interesting examples, as does Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody* and IIED Briefing *Village Voice: towards inclusive information technologies* by Ben Garside. ■ [11] Gowing, N. 2009. Bearing Witness, Geneva Conventions and the Media. *The World Today* 65 (8/9). ■ [12] Howe, J. 2008. *Crowdsourcing: How the power of the crowd is driving the future of business.* Random House Business Books. ■ [13] There are many examples of online partnerships and collaborations in Jeff Howe's *Crowdsourcing: How the power of the crowd is driving the future of business.* ■ [14] Gerry Small, Director of the Memory and Ageing Research Centre at the University of California. ■ [15] Professor Pam Briggs, Northumbria University. ■ [16] Professor David Nicholas, CIBER Research Group, University College, London. ■ [17] Krotoski, A. 2010. *The Virtual Revolution.* BBC2. ■ [18] Gerd Leonhard, media futurist. ■ [19] The Economist. 2010. *Yammering away at the office: a distraction or a bonus?* The Economist Special Report.

iied