ICT foresight

how online communities
can make the net work for the VCS

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NCVO Third Sector Foresight
Megan Griffith

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● CONTENTS

● **FOREWORD**

The Vodafone UK Foundation aims to help the people of the UK to have fuller lives by enabling access to information and opportunities through the use of technology.

ICT is transforming the ways in which people find, communicate with, and relate to, other individuals and institutions. Voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) play a vital role in bringing like-minded people together, facilitating knowledge sharing and supporting networks and communities. ICT is having an impact on all of these activities yet there is evidence that VCOs have failed to identify at a strategic level how ICT will change the environment in which, and the ways in which, they work.

To this end we are pleased to fund this series of Third Sector Foresight reports, which aim to build understanding of the impact of ICT, in the belief that the voluntary sector will be better equipped to exploit the potential of new technologies to improve the lives of their users and beneficiaries.

Sarah Shillito

Sarah Shillito
Head of Foundation
The Vodafone UK Foundation

Technology developments move fast and with that comes ever-increasing ways for the voluntary and community sector to reach new audiences, engage with their existing audience and make their voice heard in the public arena. The ICT Hub is therefore pleased to have funded this second ICT Foresight report. This report highlights the opportunities, challenges and the impact of 'social networking.' The wave of Web 2.0 behaviour can help bring together individuals and groups in a new way, for example, blogging, setting up wikis, sharing photos/videos, podcasting etc.

Research carried out by the ICT Hub has shown that whilst many organisations would like to take advantage of this technology, many small and medium-sized voluntary and community organisations – who often don't have a dedicated member of staff for ICT – can still make use of these. It is important that they know just how they can use them, how they can benefit from them and maybe even reach circles of people they have not yet reached before.

We at the ICT Hub are working to address the issue of support by providing a range of free and low-cost resources, including events, a website and publications, to help voluntary and community organisations use ICT more effectively and efficiently. For more information about the ICT Hub, visit our website www.icthub.org.uk

Nicola Thompson

Nicola Thompson
Head of the ICT Hub

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Megan Griffith leads NCVO Third Sector Foresight.

Third Sector Foresight helps voluntary and community organisations to identify and understand the strategic drivers that may impact on them, and provides tools to help organisations transform this understanding into robust strategies that can directly improve their effectiveness.

NCVO is the umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector in England. NCVO works to support the voluntary and community sector and to create an environment in which voluntary and community organisations can flourish.

www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/3s4

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● ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

● INTRODUCTION

This is the second in a series of Third Sector Foresight reports on the emerging relationship between voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) and information and communication technology (ICT). ICTs have been with us for some time – though evidence suggests that VCOs have not readily taken advantage of them – but the pace, breadth and disruptive nature of their increasingly widespread introduction and use make this a good point at which to review progress and look at future opportunities. This report, which is based on desk research and conversations with a range of experts from within and outside of our sector, maps out emerging trends in the interaction between ICT and the relationships that individuals have with each other and with organisations; the communities that they are part of, and the networks that they are developing.

If the late 19th century was the 'golden age' of mutual institutions, clubs and societies, the early 21st century is a new golden age of networks and online communities, a virtual replication of what went before. For many VCOs, online 'social' networks have the potential to be disruptive; that is, they have the power to change the model of organising upon which many VCOs, and particularly membership bodies, are based. The connections that ICT facilitates suggest that some organisations may increasingly be bypassed and that power may shift away from top-down hierarchical organisations and towards more fluid and participative networks where there is less need for a centralised 'bricks and mortar' coordinating organisation.

In particular, ICTs have ushered in new modes of communication and have changed individuals' expectations of their interaction with organisations. Individuals, whether they are members, customers or just casual supporters, are increasingly expecting dissemination to be supplemented by opportunities for dialogue. Pushing information out from the centre is no longer sufficient; people now also expect organisations to pull in information from other sources. The idea that it is the network that generates content (ideas, policies, advice) is in some ways what the sector has always done and done well, but in other ways this represents a leap in the dark for organisations for whom being 'on message' is seen as an important discipline. As such, cultures of engagement present more of a challenge than technologies, which are increasingly cheap and easy to use. For VCOs willing to embrace them and to integrate them into their ways of working, the new ICTs present a range of opportunities to engage with new audiences and to build powerful networks of their own.

This report is written for strategic thinkers – for CEOs, trustees and senior managers – to help you to understand and think through the strategic implications of ICT for your organisation. For readers feeling intimidated by the language of blogs, wikis or RSS feeds, our key message is 'don't worry about the technologies, concentrate on their application and implications'.

The report begins by examining trends in online communities and social networks and the resulting changes in behaviours and modes of communication, before going on to explore a number of strategic opportunities and challenges for VCOs. The final section of the report contains a glossary that aims to cover some of the key terms used in this area, both technical and non-technical.

Finally, other reports in this series will cover accountability and delivering services, whilst the first report on campaigning and consultation is freely available. If you have any comments, either on this report or issues you would like to see covered in future reports, contact me at foresight@ncvo-vol.org.uk

Megan Griffith, NCVO Third Sector Foresight
February 2007

● EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The relationship between voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) and information and communication technologies (ICT) is changing fast. The development of online communities and social networks present both strategic challenges and opportunities for VCOs. Key trends and their implications are explored in this report, supplemented by case study examples and expert 'think-pieces'. This report (the second in a series of ICT Foresight reports) ends with a comprehensive glossary.

Online communities and social networks

People have always come together through membership of formal organisations and informal groups, whether for mutual support, to provide a service or to campaign for change; it is this 'coming together' that is the lifeblood of civil society. The rapid growth of the internet has spawned a new set of new online forums and groups: from the earliest email lists and bulletin boards, to the blogs and wikis which grew rapidly (and gained wider coverage) in 2006. The ease with which individual supporters can be 'linked' and 'tagged' across these electronic 'spaces' mean that niche communities of supporters can be identified and their interests aggregated. This is reinforced by the growth of social networking sites (such as MySpace), allowing users to build their online profile and interact with countless others who share their interests.

A number of innovative VCOs have realised this opportunity to reach very large, and predominantly new and young, audiences. In addition to their own websites, VCOs have used social networking software to register their presence on these new networks. These communities are either:

- **'bounded'** – members register online to participate in forums or create relevant blogs.
- Others are **'personalised'** – individuals have created their own informal, fluid participative networks of interest online: supported by ever more sophisticated and accessible ICT, this is an increasing trend.

From dissemination to dialogue

ICTs have ushered in new modes of communication and have changed individuals' expectations of their interaction with organisations. Individuals, whether they are members, customers or just casual supporters, are increasingly expecting dissemination to be supplemented by opportunities for dialogue. Pushing information out from the centre is no longer sufficient; people now also expect organisations to pull in information from other sources. The idea that it is the network that generates content (ideas, policies, advice) is in some ways what the sector has always done and done well, but in other ways this represents a leap in the dark for organisations for whom being 'on message' is seen as an important discipline.

Strategic opportunities and challenges for VCOs

Six specific strategic areas for VCOs, in relation to online communities and social networking are identified by the left-hand column of the table below. A number of perspectives and case studies are given by active bloggers, think tank researchers and others in the main body of the report.

As indicated above, the very definitions of such familiar terms as 'membership' and 'transparency' are starting to shift. The new environment of social networking is much less hierarchical and far more of a continuous dialogue, with users more loyal to causes than organisations. The opportunities identified below require staff resources and active engagement from VCOs to be successful in this 'Web 2.0' age.

	Opportunities ⬆	**Risks** ⬇
Membership	Membership organisation cements its position as the respected aggregator of knowledge in its field	Membership numbers fall as member benefits (information, networking etc) are increasingly freely available elsewhere
Information	VCO asserts itself as a source of trusted advice and draws on the expertise of its network of users, volunteers and other stakeholders	By not understanding changes to how individuals search for information, the position of a VCO is eroded as the public more easily find advice elsewhere
Transparency	Trust in a VCO is enhanced by its use of technology to facilitate a continuous and open dialogue with stakeholders	A VCO adopts social tools but the culture of the organisation doesn't change, resulting in a mismatch between the tools and the way they are used and an erosion of trust
Collaboration	A VCO becomes more innovative through the involvement of its network of users, volunteers and other supporters, and attracts increased funding	A VCO's staff and volunteers are frustrated by not being able to work in a collaborative way and leave the organisation
Fundraising	By telling engaging stories and connecting donors and recipients, a VCO inspires new potential donors and increases its income	A failure to provide human stories or adequate information about the impact of their work results in a VCO being passed over by donors in favour of other organisations
Marketing	By exploiting its networks (and its networks' networks) a VCO reaches a new and diverse audience and increases its impact	Conflict arises as devolving marketing to its network grates with a VCO's continued desire to control all its messages

Read pages 23 to 30 for more.

Conclusion

The overarching message of this report is that – if properly managed by VCOs – the opportunities that the new social networks present should outweigh the risks. VCOs should not be apprehensive about utilising the *tools* of social networking, as these will be increasingly familiar to their staff – and relatively inexpensive to set up.

Sector organisations cannot, however, expect to be passive participants in this process, merely using a network as something that is 'bolted on' to their existing website. They need to understand the new participative *culture* that social networks generate. VCOs' fundamental messages may not alter but their methods of dissemination will have to, as their audience's expectations of how they receive the message evolves. To reach out effectively to the consumers of these cultural changes, VCOs need to make a serious effort to integrate the new tools into their work.

● **ONLINE COMMUNITIES
AND SOCIAL NETWORKS**

Online communities: the beginning

People have always come together through membership of formal organisations and informal groups, whether for mutual support, to provide a service or to campaign for change; it is this 'coming together' that is the lifeblood of civil society. When the internet became widely available in the 1990s, people were quick to find new ways in which to support their offline communications and groups; email lists, bulletin boards and online forums quickly sprung up and are still useful and popular today. Some of these were provided and supported by established organisations. Others were set up by individuals and informal groups grew organically. These were bounded online communities, as described below by Nancy White, which in their characteristics mirrored the offline groups that they frequently supported.

> *In the early years, bulletin board systems (BBSs) and forums (also known as discussion boards) joined email lists as tools that enabled a defined set of people to interact around some shared purpose, over time. These were usually clearly bounded communities. The boundaries were created by the tools themselves – usernames, passwords, registrations or joining of a list. The technological act of joining was the most visible indicator of being 'in' or 'out' of the community. Communities could be public or private and visible only to those who joined.*

> – Nancy White, *Blogs and community:
> launching a new paradigm for online community*
> (Nancy White, 2006)

Key social networking terms

Online means being connected to the internet, and also being there in the sense of reading or producing content.

Offline means not online, that is, not connected to the Internet. It may refer to an unconnected computer, or activities taking place without the benefit (or perhaps distraction) of a connection.

Geographic communities and communities of interest

Online communities often emerged from and remained intimately linked with physical ones. However, as well as reflecting the majority interests of existing offline communities, the internet also facilitated the aggregation of individual interests into niche communities, allowing easy connections between people who were geographically dispersed. In particular, this enabled marginalised and niche groups to communicate, support each other and mobilise more effectively and easily than previously possible, like Jooly's Joint, a community for people with Multiple Schlerosis:

> *'It all began when I was sitting in the bath one day in August 1995, pondering what to do with some free webspace. I wondered if people with MS would enjoy the opportunity to meet others with MS through the internet.'*

> – Julie Howell, founder of Jooly's Joint, www.mswebpals.org

By bringing together niche communities, the internet also enabled the marketing and selling of niche products and services to these communities; what is known as 'the long tail'.[1]

Initially commentators and academics worried that increasing online interaction would harm offline relationships with friends and family. However it is now clear that internet users are actually more, rather than less, socially connected than non-internet users. 62% of people who have used the internet for five or more years spend time with friends at least once a week whereas only 54% of non-internet users do so.[2]

The emergence of social networking sites

The years since the millennium have seen significant developments in online communication and the emergence of a new kind of website – the social networking site. Social networking sites have two important characteristics that distinguish them from the online forums that preceded them: firstly, they allow an individual to build a unique online presence and profile; and, secondly, they facilitate connections between individual users, allowing each user to build a personal network. An individual's area is created through a combination of blogs, images, and videos. The connections are facilitated through tags, lists of each person's friends or contacts, bulletin boards and internal messaging. Although the sites are not in themselves 'online communities', they provide the tools to allow communities and networks to develop and flourish. In the past five years, the use of such sites has rocketed from a niche activity into a phenomenon that engages tens of millions of internet users. For example, MySpace, the site most frequently referred to in discussions of social networking, has amassed over 100 million users since its launch in 2003.

Key social networking terms

Blogs are websites with dated items of content in reverse chronological order, self-published by bloggers. Items – sometimes called 'posts' – may have keyword 'tags' associated with them, are usually available as feeds, and often allow commenting.

Tags are keywords attached to a blog post, bookmark, photo or other item of content so you and others can find them easily through searches and aggregation.

For more key terms, see pages 34-37

Who uses social networking sites?

Social networking sites are currently used to a far greater extent by teenagers than by any other age group (55% of all online American youths aged between 12 and 17 use online social networking sites[3]) though there are also many sites that cater for adult audiences. Commercial brands and unsigned rock bands have been quick to exploit the potential of such sites and it is becoming increasingly common for VCOs to enter these spaces to keep their 'friends' (the name for contacts on MySpace) up to date on their organisation's activities (for example, see the myspace page of Uxfest, a charity music festival: http://groups.myspace.com/uxfest). However, moving into these spaces isn't always easy for organisations; success depends on developing a natural and interesting presence that other users will feel is authentic.

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1. See www.thelongtail.com for more on this concept.
2. 'Isolates or socialites? The social ties of internet users' in *British Social Attitudes: the 23rd Report – Perspectives on a changing society* (Sage for Natcen, 2007)
3. *Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview* (Pew Internet Project, 2007)

Some VCOs that would previously have used online forums have embraced the potential of social networking software within a bounded community (for example, the US site March of Dimes www.marchofdimes.com). Members register and 'join' the community and are then offered the chance to create a blog, though forums are often retained to supplement these. Photos, video blogs and podcasts offer a far richer experience than previously possible in forum based communities.[4]

● THINK PIECE: COMMONS IN CYBERSPACE

In 2001 Jay Blumler and Stephen Coleman set out a vision of a 'Civic Commons in cyberspace'.[5] The authors outlined an open space for citizens to gather and deliberate on proposals issued by public bodies; it would be created to be independent but with statutory status. This 'electric commons' would be no mere talking shop; it would be 'an integral component of the representative system'.

Five years later, the UK's political institutions have not got behind this vision but, perhaps, in a roundabout way, citizens have taken it forward. For example, the growth and further potential of social network websites generated much speculation and coverage in the media during 2006.

MySpace, YouTube, Second Life and a raft of smaller niche sites host online communities where people gather to interact in seemingly ever-greater numbers. People create and maintain their personal profiles, they view and download content uploaded by others, they rate it, comment on it, and they upload their own.

The sites are maintained for commercial purposes but their services are, in the main, provided free of charge. The companies behind them stay out of the way, offering only legal and technical services in return for a steady stream of advertising revenue. Arguably, these sites are the 'Commons' in cyber world.

Don't believe the hype – politics is big on social network sites (alongside the mountains of pop-culture, gossip and humour). Ideologies and policies are discussed with varying degrees of refinement but never for want of vigour. Campaigns and protests – large and small – have been set in motion targeted at local, national and international decision-makers. The problem is that despite the wealth of talk online, there is frustratingly little action resulting from it. So, can these online communities make a civic and political impact in the offline world? Can sites like these ever constitute a 'civic Commons' in cyberspace'?

Blumler and Coleman envisaged a new public body tasked with the management of their 'Commons', which would combine the virtues of visionary amateurism with thorough, practical professionalism. Whilst one agency might struggle to exert sufficient influence, perhaps a collective could. Government and Parliament are unwelcome participants in these online networks; commercial outfits will not (and should not) get involved. Therefore, the opportunity is with VCOs to convert the raw civic and political discourse happening online into something tangible that can influence real-world policy-making.

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4. *Blogs and Community – launching a new paradigm for online community?* (Nancy White, 2006)
5. *Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace* (IPPR/Citizens Online, 2001)

As the virtual world gains ever more relevance in people's everyday lives, VCOs have the capacity to bring greater cohesion between the offline and online. VCOs can add practical and visionary value to social networks. They have the trust offline, and we have seen that they can transfer it online. (For example, the Make Poverty History campaign, and the use of sites like Flickr by in-the-field activists such as Greenpeace.) They have the practical skills to focus the noise of millions of voices in a way that can spur our institutions and politicians into action. They have the wherewithal to uncover useful data and evidence from the online clamour and get it in front of key decision-makers, whilst retaining a constant transparency. They have the commitment and feedback loops in place that can help people track the influence of their actions, thus promoting the democratic renewal that was the spur for Blumler and Coleman's original vision.

– Ross Ferguson, Director of the Hansard Society's E-Democracy Programme
www.hansardsociety.org.uk/programmes/e-democracy

The future: personalised networks

Social networking tools have been introduced to some bounded online communities, thereby providing a richer online experience for their members. However, individuals are also increasingly using these tools to connect with others in a far looser way – and to reframe their membership of groups into a network with themselves at the centre. This has implications for individual and collective identity, power and control, and for the nature of online community, as Nancy White explains:

Then blog adoption accelerated. People began to blog in specific niches, from gaming, to politics, to third grade classroom curriculum, to chocolate; ecosystems of people writing about things they cared about. They started finding each other, commenting on each others' blogs. RSS (Really Simple Syndication) and feedreaders began to offer new possibilities about how we discovered and read blog posts. Other … tools such as tagging and mashups created ways to aggregate and remix the individual offerings into a unique package, customised by each of us to our own preferences. The game had changed. And with it changed some of our assumptions about what online community looks like, how individual and collective identity, power and control show up in these communities, and, at the core, the balance between the individual and the group.

– Nancy White, *Blogs and community: launching a new paradigm for online community*
(Nancy White, 2006)

Key social networking terms

RSS is short for Really Simple Syndication. This allows you to subscribe to content on blogs and other social media and have it delivered to you through a feed.

Feeds are the means by which you can read, view or listen to items from blogs and other RSS-enabled sites without visiting the site, by subscribing and using an aggregator or news-reader. Feeds contain the content of an item and any associated tags without the design or structure of a web page.

Aggregation is the process of gathering and remixing content from blogs and other web-sites that provide RSS feeds. The results may be displayed in an aggregator website like Bloglines, or directly on your desktop using software often also called a 'newsreader'.

For more key terms, see pages 34-37

The most technologically literate are already harnessing the potential of the social web in this way, but the rest of the population will increasingly develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to follow suit. Remember that many of today's teenagers, tomorrow's adults, are growing up with sites like MySpace and are fluent in the language of the social web[6]. As William Gibson said: "The future is here. It's just unevenly distributed".

Rather than joining a number of groups, lists or online communities, individuals can now use social networking tools to connect and communicate with the people and organisations that they choose to be part of their network, both personal and professional; compare this with membership of an organisation or group whose membership you have no control over. In response to individuals' increasing desire for control over their networks, new ready-made tools are emerging (eg The People Aggregator[7]), which allow individuals to build a new social network, although all that is really needed is a blog and an aggregator. As mobile telephones increasingly operate as mobile computers, and include GPS tracking, it may even become commonplace to make your physical location known to members of your network, blurring the boundary yet further between online and offline worlds.

Therefore, individuals can now place themselves at the centre of their own online network and shape their virtual world around their personal identity and interests. As a result, it is increasingly important for VCOs to communicate in a way that enables individuals to include them in their networks, as is explored in the next section.

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6. Although even teenagers have varying levels of skills in relation to social networking, as Danah Boyd explores at
   www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2007/01/07/pew_data_on_soc.html
7. www.peopleaggregator.net/;
   see www.iconnectdots.com/ctd/2006/06/marc_canters_pe.html for analysis.

● FROM DISSEMINATION TO DIALOGUE

New communication models

The birth of online communities signalled the beginning of a shift in the communications sphere from one-to-many 'broadcast models' (eg television, radio, newspapers) to many-to-many 'conversational models' and the creation of new communication networks. This shift, sometimes described as the 'democratisation of media', offered opportunities to both individuals and VCOs to get their voices heard more easily. However, new expectations of a two-way conversation have placed pressure on organisations to not only disseminate information but also to engage in dialogue. As explored in other ICT Foresight reports, this is a strategic opportunity for voluntary organisations as this dialogue can increase the legitimacy of their campaigning and add a human voice to their communications.[8]

Social networking technologies are a manifestation of the shift to many-to-many conversational communication models. One clear result is that online social networks have no hierarchy and no expert at the centre. This flat model of numerous connections can be a powerful channel for spreading a message. An organisation which has a network of 'friends' on one or many social networking sites can start a 'snowball' effect, whereby the friends invite their friends to link with the organisation. These new contacts can then invite ever more people to link and contribute to the network, eventually allowing the organisation to reach people well beyond its original circle. For example, an American group, autistics.org, has made a splash on YouTube, with videos in which people with autism describe their view of the world. Tens of thousands of views, supported by hundreds of comments and bloggers adding the films to their own websites, have enabled the message to spread way beyond their traditional constituency.[9] This is sometimes referred to as generating a 'buzz', a term which is gaining currency.[10] However, maintaining an online presence in addition to traditional communications can place a burden on organisations:

> *'One of the things that's really striking is the increasing diversity in the forms of media that different generations are using to interact with organisations. Managing that full range of media is a challenge for VCOs.'*
>
> – Andy Dearden, Sheffield Hallam University (roundtable discussion, October 2006)

Changing behaviours and shifting power

The behaviours of, and interactions between, people in these open and fluid blog-based communities are quite different from those in enclosed online forums, or the bounded blog communities discussed above. It can be compared to the difference between groups and networks; whilst the former emphasises coherence and unity, the latter favours autonomy and diversity, as Stephen Downes explains:

> *Groups require unity, networks require diversity. Groups require coherence, networks require autonomy. Groups require privacy or segregation, networks require openness. Groups require focus of voice, networks require interaction. The group I am with right now is very intent on being a group. That doesn't interest me. I have no wish to lose my identity and my freedom, my empowerment. Because a group is subject to this very objection – backlash, groupthink, the works. But a network is not.[11]*

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8. See *ICT Foresight: Campaigning and consultation in the age of participatory media* (NCVO/ICT Hub, 2006) and a forthcoming ICT Foresight report on accountability and transparency.
9. Try searching for silentmiaow on youtube.
10. For example, see this discussion of the need for a 'Buzz Director' in VCOs – www.nfp2.co.uk/2006/11/03/buzz-director
11. Quoted here: www.mediablends.net/the_difference_between_groups_and_networks_forums_and_blog_communities

As a generation of bloggers grow up, they may value their personal identity and freedom more than the previous wave of online adopters, which will impact on the very meaning of 'joining'. As shown by the decline in membership of political parties, individuals are less inclined to be herded or to join an organisation with a rigid basket of policies. As George Siemens puts it, "I like the individuality that a blog affords – my writing, my thoughts, my space. I don't mind collaborating with others ... but only if I don't lose my voice and identity in the process."[12] 'Joining' has become less of a commitment (compare, for example, Oxfam's recent 'I'm in' text campaign to membership of a campaigning organisation in the 1960s). It is more fluid, and more likely to be just one element of an individual's expression of their personal and political identity. This has implications for the ways in which VCOs work with others in their field.

> *The boundaries of traditional nonprofit organisations are under relentless assault by new patterns of communication and association that are stronger than the corporate model of governance and stronger than nonprofit brands. The media of this assault are social software and the network on which such software flourishes. The assault is fuelled by the very passions and people from which the organisations themselves once emerged. Ironically, although it threatens to dissolve their boundaries, this assault is very much on the same side as most of the organisations themselves.*
> — Michael Gilbert, The Permeable Nonprofit (Nonprofit Online News, 2006)

In the network society, the balance of power between formal organisations and informal networks is slowly shifting. The power of networks is enhanced by a new generation of social sites, such as Pledgebank. Launched in 2005, Pledgebank allows individuals to create pledges and invite others to join them. In this way, as an alternative to joining a VCO, it enables individuals to express their own values and find others with similar interests which, to a greater or lesser extent, 'fits' with their values and interests. A more network orientated view of the world is a challenge for any organisation that pictures the world revolving around them.

Is your website 'social'?

The discussion above will hopefully have made clear that social networking is a way of communicating, not simply a set of technological tools. As such, 'social' elements are increasingly becoming just another feature of many websites, even more traditional sites. As people become more familiar with creating their own online content and with contributing to websites (eg by rating something, commenting on something, or creating a profile) their expectations that websites will be 'social' in this way is rising.

Visitors may feel more inclined to trust an organisation that they see is itself part of a network and is pulling in (aggregating) information from other useful and interesting sources. Likewise, individuals will want to link from their online spaces to the organisations that they support and will want to pull content from the websites they are interested in, into their own sites. This is an excellent opportunity for VCOs as this means that their organisation will, in essence, be recommended to the full network of that individual. However, organisations that don't integrate social elements into their websites may risk not being found online by interested people, or turning off those who find that they can't engage with an organisation in the way they increasingly come to expect.

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12. Quoted here:
    www.mediablends.net/the_difference_between_groups_and_networks_forums_and_blog_communities

To develop a social network or join existing ones?

The emergence of social networking sites presents an interesting challenge for VCOs: should organisations invest in developing social networking elements on their own site (as described above), concentrate on developing a presence in existing social networking spaces, or try to do a bit of both? The answer will clearly depend on the context, resources and priorities of the individual organisation. For example, an organisation serving a niche group may find significant benefits in developing a multi-blogger site, as Ingrid Koehler – herself the manager of a large online community for local government – argues:

> *'If there's a need, a demand for information and relationships within a particular group, but the market just isn't there, then you need to create that platform to create that market place or that discussion area. However, if there is a well-developed market of ideas then maybe the best thing to do is to participate in these existing conversations.'*
>
> – Ingrid Koehler, IDeA (roundtable discussion, October 2006)

However, for organisations working on causes with broad appeal, or serving large client groups, it is increasingly important to be aware of and engage with the many conversations and networks springing up online, rather than wait for people to come to their own online space. David Wilcox argues this case:

> *'It's not about "how do we promote what we're doing from our increasingly fancy website here" but 'how can we get out there and create a buzz in the places where people actually are?'*
>
> – David Wilcox, Designing for Civil Society (roundtable discussion, October 2006)

People will increasingly come together online where they choose. Users will migrate around different online tools, often following new or popular sites. In this instance, VCOs may choose to develop a presence in existing networks and online spaces, and think about how to pull information from external sources into their website, as well as push out information to their new and expanded network. Robin Hamman's recommendations for the commercial sector are largely applicable:

- *Learn to engage with your users wherever they are (whatever services they are using)*
- *Be nimble and move with your audience(s) as it (they) move from service to service, platform to platform*
- *Extract value by helping your audience find third party audiences you've allied with and by learning from those third party audiences*

> – Robin Hamman, *The death of online community as we knew it and I feel fine*
> (Robin Hamman, 2006)

The starting point may be to embrace organisational blogging and engage with existing blogs. A subsequent challenge will be to understand how social networks join up and how to aggregate the wealth of information that is available.

● STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE VCS

The broad implications for VCOs of the changing world of online communities and social networking have been explored in preceding pages. This section explores six specific strategic opportunities for organisations, and the related challenges.

Membership: changing models and motivations

Social networking technologies, and their ability to connect people with similar interests or needs, could have significant implications for membership organisations in the future. Motivations for joining membership organisations, and expectations of the networking potential that organisations will provide, are likely to change.

> *It used to be that you joined associations because it was a way of meeting like-minded people and getting help, facilities, information and other things difficult or costly to organise for yourself. These days it is much easier to find people and resources online, and to mix and match these assets into project teams, communities of practice, and informal networks*
>
> — David Wilcox, Why bother with 'membership' in future?[13]

Social networking technologies have the potential to reinvigorate membership associations. After all, the technologies are all about participation, which is at the heart of many membership organisations. However, hierarchical structures may increasingly put potential members off, as will an inability to participate and contribute in the ways that people want. Membership models may need to change from 'top-down' networks (what David Wilcox terms 'Join us'), to networks that support communities of practice and knowledge sharing ('Join in') – or even fluid models with reduced central control ('Join up').[14] The risk is that more fluid membership models, combined with more mobile and less committed members, could endanger the sustainability of organisations.
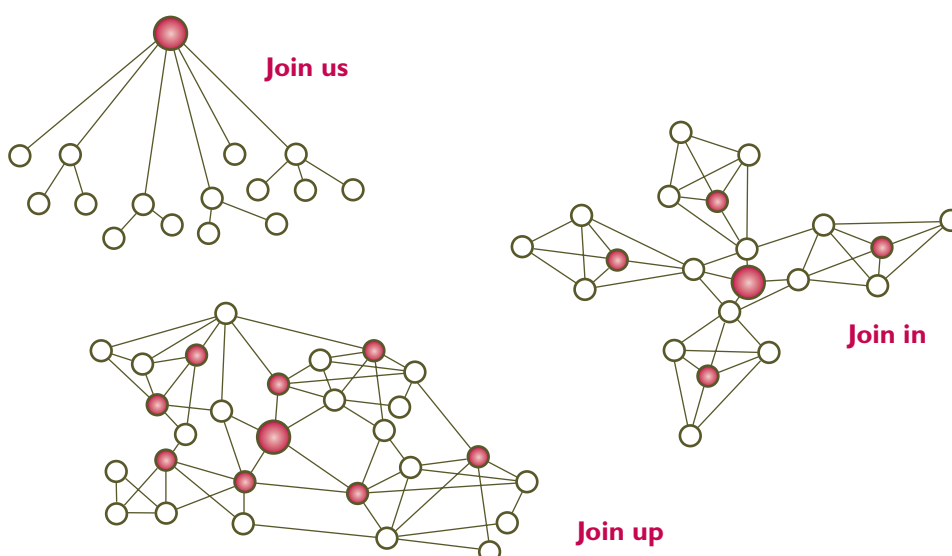
13. *Why bother with 'membership' in future?* (David Wilcox, 2006)
14. For more on David Wilcox's network modes, visit http://socialmedia.wikispaces.com/Network+structures

Membership organisations may need to rethink their role and become 'facilitators of knowledge creation and sharing' rather than solely pushing information out from the centre.[15] Social networking technologies can enable organisations to be the trusted and respected aggregators of knowledge on their particular area of interest. As some of the benefits of membership become freely available online, organisations may also need to focus on providing exclusive or unique benefits that are not available through peer-to-peer sharing.

Information and advice: new knowledge communities

A wealth of information and advice is now freely available online and the importance of peer-to-peer advice and support is growing. 'Experts' no longer have the status that they once had and individuals are increasingly more inclined to trust their peers, and in particular those known to them, the members of their network. This presents a challenge for VCOs providing information and advice, as it suggests that they may increasingly be bypassed in favour of informal peer-to-peer sources. However, in the context of the ever-increasing amount of information online – a world where 'common sense' can often win out over facts – there is an important role for VCOs in being a trusted source of information and advice. In addition, social networking technologies provide an opportunity for these VCOs to increase the quality of the advice and information they provide by enabling them to help build new knowledge communities by hosting and moderating online peer-to-peer services.

For campaigning and lobbying organisations, and those delivering services, developing peer-to-peer communities can strengthen one of the key sources of the sector's legitimacy and strength – our proximity to users. Social networking tools can take this proximity to the next level, by integrating the expertise and knowledge of users into an organisation's work. For example, Youth Net use a public bookmarking site, del.icio.us, to collaboratively build a source of knowedge to add value to the answers they provide on an online Q&A service.
(http://del.icio.us/agony_bible; www.thesite.org/community/askthesite/askaquestion).

Transparency: opening a continuous dialogue

Social networking tools can facilitate a more open and transparent way of working. Blogs written by staff, volunteers or service users can open a continuous dialogue with the public about the vision, aims and activities of organisations. They can also enable a more collaborative approach to developing new services, ideas or campaigns by actively seeking feedback on ideas and welcoming ideas from outside of the organisation. However, the tools alone will not facilitate this unless the organisation is truly transparent and actively listens to its audience. This can often require a significant culture change and is not without challenges.

There are two aspects to blogs. Blogs that charities write for their supporters and blogs these stakeholders write about the charity. The latter can be very effective, although a note of caution is necessary: a charity's 'brand' does not have the same protection as a commercial company because your supporters feel strongly about the charity they support and feel they have some 'ownership' of the brand. They don't think there is anything wrong with changing your logo… after all, they are raising money for your cause. So you don't have 100 percent control over what they say and this can sometimes become an issue. So yes, blogs can be powerful but they must be carefully managed and resourced.

After we started our internal blog, we were wondering if we should offer a blogging facility on our website. That's when Kelly emailed, asking if she could start a blog. We thought we'd give it a try. We have been surprised by the traffic and the interest generated by Kelly's blog. It has been one of the most popular areas of the website for weeks. We actually met Kelly for the first time yesterday.

15. *We Have Always Done It That Way: 101 Things About Associations We Must Change*
(Five Independent Thinkers, 2006)

Following her feedback, we have decided to ask more people to blog for us. Other visitors to the website will be able to comment. But for the reason I mentioned above, the posts will first be checked by our 'New Media Nurse'.

– Bertie Bosrédon, Head of New Media, Breast Cancer Care.
Interviewed by Steve Bridger: www.nfp2.co.uk/2006/12/11/bertie-bosredon

Another way of being more transparent is to publish links to the websites and online resources that an organisation uses.[16] This will provide useful additional information for visitors to your website; at the same time, being open about your sources and influences may also promote trust in your organisation.

● THINK PIECE: THE ARTIST FORMERLY KNOWN AS OUR AUDIENCE

Demos is the think tank for everyday democracy, committed to the idea that all people should have greater influence over factors that affect them and their communities. Over the past 10 years, we have explored complexity and networks, systems approaches, social and technological innovation, and the application of open source ideas to policy. But how do we bring openness to the heart of our organisation without compromising the impact and quality of our research?

Our website became the place to put the theory into practice. Most content management systems start from an assumption that the organisation should decide what information their employees or their audience need, and the taxonomies, page hierarchies and workflows trickle down from the central assumptions.

We started from the perspective of the research staff and asked instead what tools they needed to do their jobs and what could give them more autonomy and support. To do our jobs better, we needed to tap into the value and creativity of the partners and policy practitioners outside of Demos. Our ideal was to not only create a research tool for us, but to unleash the creativity of the 'artist fomerly known as our audience' to keep our work as relevant to practitioners as possible. We felt that the communications functions of the site would follow naturally once we made this basic shift.

Social networking tools were the obvious choice based on our needs. With the help of Headshift, a social software consultant and developer, we combined blogging, tagging, bookmarking and podcasting in a unique knowledge community system. These tools provide two main advantages over traditional content management systems: flexibility and relevance. For example, we let researchers and active audience members 'tag' content with themes, so that as our policy research areas evolve, so does the content navigation (or 'folksonomy'). Blogging gives us a real-time, easy-to-use tool to discuss current events which are then archived within relevant projects for months or years. Researchers' on-site activity is then clustered around their profiles, where anyone can see what they have been reading (bookmarks), writing (blog posts and publications) and thinking (tags and themes).

Especially for policy discussions, this level of openness is not universally embraced. We still debate the balance between putting unformed ideas on the blog and waiting to polish our arguments. Some people tend to use the site more than others, leading to an imbalanced set of thematic areas. We wondered if comments, which we feature on our homepage, would get nasty. But for the most part, the experiment is earning admiration from users and visitors. Embracing transparency and assuming the best of our users was a safe bet.

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16. There are simple tools that can help you do this, for example visit http://del.icio.us

Where to next? We're growing our networking tools to allow people who know and find Demos a useful 'greenhouse of ideas' to be able to network with each other. Not only could our policy stories travel further, but our users get the benefit of new connections and fresh ideas.

What 'web 2.0' offers organisations is a free or very inexpensive ways to make the most of users as co-developers and, in the words of Tim O'Reilly, to 'harness collective intelligence.' The success of Wikipedia – where self-selected editors provide just-in-time updates to create a knowledge-base that rivals the expert version – provides the inspiration. For organisations like ours with a social mission, this means we get cumulative effects: our own work gets better the more we involve the public.

– Molly Webb, Website Manager/Researcher, Demos
www.demos.co.uk/people/mollywebb

Collaboration: working and learning within a network

Once an organisation has developed an active network, collaboration is the natural next step. Increasingly, staff, volunteers and trustees may want to work in a more networked way. However, this requires significant changes to the ways in which different members and stakeholders of an organisation work together.
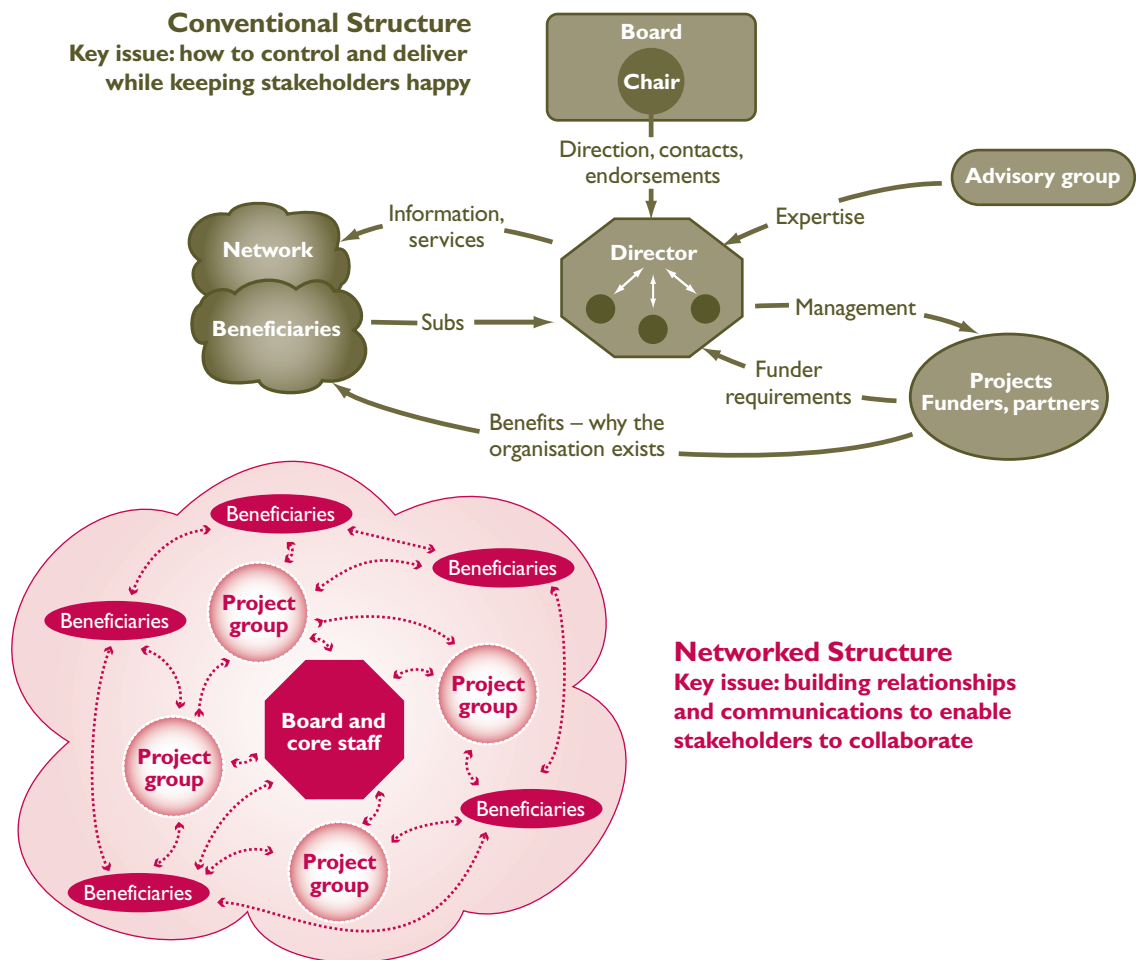
David Wilcox, *Designing for Civil Society*

Businesses are increasingly calling upon their networks of customers to help them develop and test new products and services, and sourcing things from amateurs rather than paying professionals (for example, the BBC and other media outlets published photos sent in by underground and bus travellers after the 7 July 2005 London bombings). This is sometimes termed 'crowdsourcing' (a wordplay on the term 'outsourcing') and is largely supported by social networking technology. As shown by the rise of citizen journalism, the public are increasingly keen to publish their ideas and experiences freely, even when it leads to commercial gain for an organisation. Demos has termed this the 'Pro-Am Revolution' – 'enthusiastic amateurs, pursuing activities to professional standards'.[17]

> *Greenpeace has used tags to encourage others to contribute images, experiences and creativity to a campaign against toxic chemicals in computers, by labelling them 'greenmyapple'. All Greenpeace has to do is keep track of new material which is tagged in this way and share it on their website. What unfolds is a multi-authored story with ideas and energy from far beyond the confines of traditional organisations.*
>
> – Nick Booth
> For more, see www.podnosh.com/blog/2007/01/21/green-ipod

Some VCOs are experts at harnessing the expertise and enthusiasm of the public in many ways, and are also valued for designing services around the needs of users. Exploiting social networking technologies and working in a more collaborative way with a wide and diverse network of users, supporters and other stakeholders could help organisations to develop even better and more innovative services.

> *Network Collaboration steps beyond the relationship centric nature of team and community collaboration. It is collaboration that starts in individual action and self interest and accrues to the network. Membership and timelines are open and unbounded. There are no explicit roles. Members most likely do not know all the other members. Power is distributed. This form of collaboration is driven by the advent of social software, a response to the overwhelming volume of information we are creating.*
>
> – Shawn Callahan, Three types of collaboration (Anecdote, 2006: www.anecdote.com.au/archives/2006/11/three_types_of.html)

Social networking technologies can also improve peer-to-peer learning and training for VCS professionals and practitioners (for example, see The School of Everything, a new initiative from the Young Foundation – www.schoolofeverything.com). This can add real value to organisations, and staff will increasingly expect to be able to access such sites from work.

Fundraising: connecting donors and recipients

The VCS economy is becoming more sophisticated and professional. Donors and funders are demanding more information to support their decisions, and expect organisations to demonstrate the impact of their 'investment'. A number of organisations are attempting to ensure that money is allocated in a rational, efficient and effective way by increasing information in the public sphere about the impact of VCOs' work (for example, see New Philanthropy Capital, Guidestar UK and Intelligent Giving). Social networking technologies can take these developments a step further, by connecting donors with the people and organisations that they want to support, or are supporting (for example, see www.globalgiving.com, www.kiva.org or Robert Thompson's powerful video about donating a waterbuffalo to a family in China – www.waterbuffalostory.com).

17. *The Pro-Am Revolution* (Demos, 2004) www.demos.co.uk/publications/proameconomy

I think that charity websites should be talking much more about human stories. There's never been a better opportunity to link beneficiaries to the people raising money or donating, to close that gap. You can't engage with a brochure but you can engage with real people through these new tools.

– Steve Bridger, nfp2.0 (roundtable discussion, October 2006)

Marketing and campaigning: engaging new audiences

"From now on, a smart candidate will reach you through your cellphone, your friends, the organisations you belong to and the Web sites you visit."

– Ken Mehlman, Republican Party Chief on US party politics
(quoted in Netpulse, from Politics Online: www.politicsonline.com)

In online environments, recommendations are becoming increasingly important. People are more and more inclined to trust the recommendations of those in their networks and other peers: a common example is the rating system on sites such as Amazon. However, the role of recommendations within social networks is also important for VCOs. Steve Bridger predicts the introduction of a 'my causes' tabs on MySpace and other social networking sites[18], where users can show (and by default recommend) the organisations that are close to their hearts. As music companies have realised, viral marketing (spreading messages through the networks of your network) is becoming increasingly powerful. Individuals who are committed and passionate about a cause have a potential, often untapped by VCOs, to get others involved. A recent example is that of two US charities, The Genocide Intervention Network and STAND: A Student Anti-Genocide Coalition, which grew from small student groups to national organisations in under two years by reaching out through social networks.[19]

However, there is a strategic challenge for the ways in which organisations communicate, as networks can challenge an organisation's ability to control a message.

Among organisations for whom the careful manipulation and transmission of images and messages is a fine art, there is much to be unlearnt. Critically, they will have to look for ways to insert themselves effectively into ongoing conversations, which they can shape and influence but probably not control.

– Demos, *Network Logic* (Demos, 2004)

The Emergence and Rise of Mass Social Media
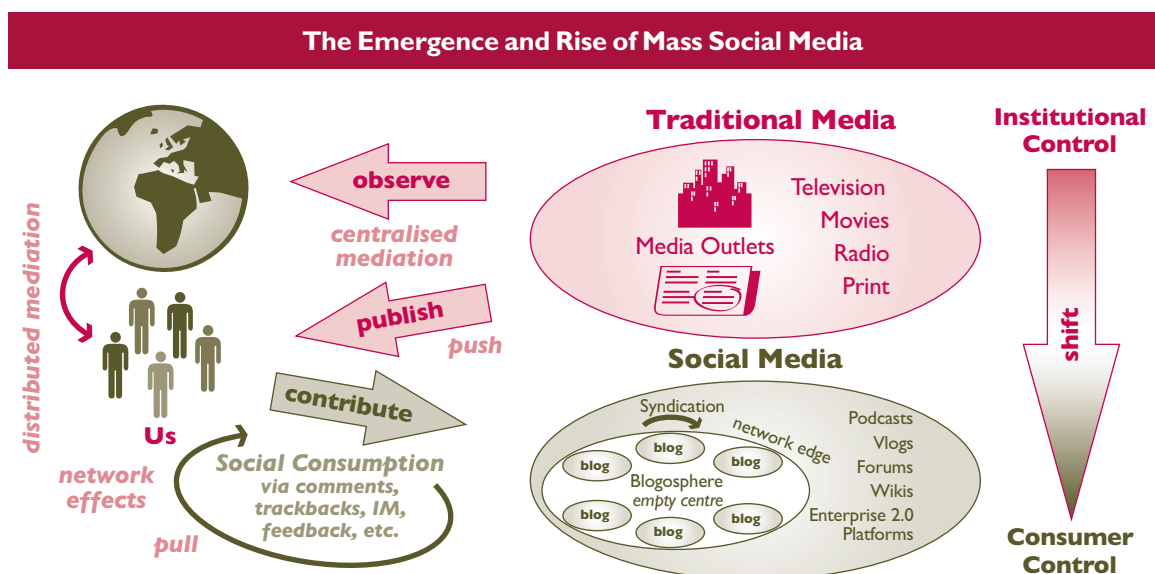
Creative Commons By License from Dion Hinchcliffe http://web2.wsj2.com/social_media_goes_mainstream.htm

18. www.nfp2.co.uk/2007/01/04/the-trends-that-will-drive-charities-in-2007/
19. Read more about the growth of these charities – www.idealware.org/articles/social_networking_genocide.php

As explored above in the section 'Changing behaviours and shifting power', loyalty to organisations is changing. Increasingly, people are loyal to causes in the way that previous generations were loyal to organisations. For example, Make Poverty History provided a way for people to sign up to a cause rather than a single organisation, and to feel part of a significant movement that kept gathering momentum. Expectations of collaborative working and coalitions are likely to increase and organisations that seek to own a cause without recognising others working in their field may not attract more network-minded individuals.

● THINK PIECE: DON'T LIKE YOUR ORGANISATION'S CAMPAIGNING POLICY? SWITCHING IS EASY ONLINE! OR, YOU COULD EVEN START YOUR OWN CAMPAIGN!

The new-generation social networking technologies (known as Web 2.0) could open up new opportunities for campaigning organisations looking to engage their members and supporters actively behind campaigns. However, the technologies could also pose quite significant challenges for these organisations by making it easier for dissatisfied members and supporters either to migrate to other campaigning organisations or to establish their own campaigns.

The purpose of the two mini-scenarios set out below is to provide strategic decision-makers with a way into discussing the opportunities, challenges, and choices generated by the technologies. As they are presented here, the scenarios are generic and hypothetical.

Used within the strategic decision-setting discussion, they should also take account of that organisation's core values, vision, mission, aims, nature, and performance. Consideration should also be given to other relevant trends and forces within the organisation's external operating environment.

Scenario 1. Organisation not doing the business?
Starting your own campaign is easy online!

Mike was feeling even more frustrated than usual after the local branch meeting. It was clear to him that the national headquarters was calling the shots on campaign priorities. Worse than that, though, these days they seemed to have lost their bite; preferring endless meetings with government officials to real activism. It wasn't surprising that the local membership had haemorrhaged numbers over the last year, or that another couple of members had just said that they wouldn't be coming back and wouldn't be renewing their subscriptions either. Cathy's suggestion could be the way to get things going again, though. They'd set up their own campaign online and get some real energy and spontaneity back into things and really talk to each other! And he'd liked her comment as she'd driven off, that they'd be able to reach people well beyond the local community…

Under this scenario, voluntary organisations could suffer serious loss of members and supporters as existing members migrate to the new virtual network. Potential new members and supporters could also be lost to the new virtual network.

Scenario 2. Engaging your organisation's members and supporters

As his executive team left his office, the new CEO of YourVoice was in positive mood. His Director of Communications had made a strong case for the organisation getting much more engaged with its membership and supporters; finding out what they want from the organisation, what campaigns are important to them, and how they want to be involved were good starting points. She was right, too, that there could be expertise and skills out there in the local branches that could be available to the whole organisation, including throughout the local branch network. Engaging properly with the grassroots could generate real vitality and enthusiasm. And the Director of IT had been really excited about the possibilities too. Clearly, there needed to be new investment behind it, and they'd have to look at that carefully, but this – what had he called it? – 'Web 2.0'?, seemed to be a good way of getting people talking and interacting in ways they couldn't currently do…

Under this scenario, voluntary organisations could be highly attractive communal spaces in which grassroots engagement is both inspiring and strengthening. The rewards for organisations that are able to engage their members and supporters effectively are likely to include increased commitment, and expanding membership and support.

– Dr Eleanor Burt, School of Management, University of St Andrews,
www.st-andrews.ac.uk/management/people/eleanorburt.shtml

● **CONCLUSION**

This report has explored how online communities and social networks will impact on the VCS in a range of areas. The disruptive nature of the technologies presents undoubted strategic challenges for VCOs. However, more important are the significant opportunities that these technologies offer to help organisations to engage with others and to build networks to increase their effectiveness. The biggest risk of all is to fail to exploit these opportunities and to therefore fail to keep up with the changing expectations of the sector's many stakeholders.

Some key strategic opportunities and risks

	Opportunities ⬆	Risks ⬇
Membership	Membership organisation cements its position as the respected aggregator of knowledge in its field	Membership numbers fall as member benefits (information, networking etc) are increasingly freely available elsewhere
Information	VCO asserts itself as a source of trusted advice and draws on the expertise of its network of users, volunteers and other stakeholders	By not understanding changes to how individuals search for information, the position of a VCO is eroded as the public more easily find advice elsewhere
Transparency	Trust in a VCO is enhanced by its use of technology to facilitate a continuous and open dialogue with stakeholders	A VCO adopts social tools but the culture of the organisation doesn't change, resulting in a mismatch between the tools and the way they are used and an erosion of trust
Collaboration	A VCO becomes more innovative through the involvement of its network of users, volunteers and other supporters, and attracts increased funding	A VCO's staff and volunteers are frustrated by not being able to work in a collaborative way and leave the organisation
Fundraising	By telling engaging stories and connecting donors and recipients, a VCO inspires new potential donors and increases its income	A failure to provide human stories or adequate information about the impact of their work results in a VCO being passed over by donors in favour of other organisations
Marketing	By exploiting its networks (and its networks' networks) a VCO reaches a new and diverse audience and increases its impact	Conflict arises as devolving marketing to its network grates with a VCO's continued desire to control all its messages

Moving forward

The diagram on the preceding page reveals that the most significant strategic challenges for VCOs moving forward are cultural ones. The tools themselves are becoming increasingly easy to use and many are also available as 'open source', meaning that organisations can begin to experiment without significant cost implications. Although skills gaps may appear to be a concern, increasingly staff and volunteers will be familiar with using similar tools in other settings or, if not, their children can probably provide a free crash course! However, where VCOs seek to use these tools, there clearly needs to be a readiness to accept the cultural changes that they bring, whether it's relinquishing some control over key messages or devoting more time to researching and re-presenting some of the outputs of other organisations. The strategic application of such tools necessitates that they are integrated into ways and means of working, rather than simply bolted onto organisations. ICTs can, and should, strengthen the VCS, a sector which, after all, emerged from the values of mutualism, peer-support and community.

● FURTHER READING

Reports and books

- 'Isolates or socialites? The social ties of internet users' in *British Social Attitudes: the 23rd Report – Perspectives on a changing society* (Sage for Natcen, 2007) www.natcen.ac.uk/natcen/pages/news_and_media_docs/BSA_%20press_release_jan07.pdf (brief summary)

- *ICT Foresight: Campaigning and consultation in the age of participatory media* (NCVO/ICT Hub, 2006) www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/publications/publication.asp?id=3458

- *I-See-T: Exploring ICT for collaboration in the voluntary sector* report (ruralnet uk, 2006) http://blog.i-see-t.org.uk/?p=244

- *Network Logic* (Demos, 2004) www.demos.co.uk/publications/networks

- *Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace* (IPPR/Citizens Online, 2001) www.citizensonline.org.uk/site/media/documents/925_Realising%20Democracy%20Online.pdf

- *Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview* (Pew Internet Project, 2007) www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/198/report_display.asp

- *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (Yale University Press, 2006) www.benkler.org/wealth_of_networks

- *We Have Always Done It That Way: 101 Things About Associations We Must Change* (Five Independent Thinkers, 2006) www.alwaysdoneitthatway.com/

Articles and think-pieces

- *Blogs and Community – launching a new paradigm for online community?* (Nancy White, 2006) http://kt.flexiblelearning.net.au/edition-11-editorial/blogs-and-community-–-launching-a-new-paradigm-for-online-community

- *How social networks lead to innovation* (NESTA, 2007) www.nesta.org.uk/informing/articles/ron_burt.aspx

- *How to Use MySpace to Raise Awareness: Three nonprofit organisations share their experiences* (Techsoup, 2006) www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/internet/page6016.cfm

- *The death of online community as we knew it and I feel fine* (Robin Hamman, 2006) www.cybersoc.com/2006/07/is_online_commu.html

- *The Permeable Nonprofit* (Michael Gilbert, 2006) http://news.gilbert.org/PermeableNP

- *Why bother with 'membership' in future?* (David Wilcox, 2006) www.designingforcivilsociety.org/2006/08/why_bother_with.html

Blogs

- *Cybersoc* (Robin Hamman) www.cybersoc.com

- *Designing for Civil Society* (David Wilcox) www.designingforcivilsociety.org

- *Full Circle* (Nancy White) www.fullcirc.com/weblog/onfacblog.htm

- *Getting Attention: Helping nonprofits succeed through effective marketing* (Nancy Schwartz) www.gettingattention.org/my_weblog

- *nfp2.0: How not-for-profits can benefit from blogs and social media* (Steve Bridger) www.nfp2.co.uk

- *Nonprofit Online News* (Michael Gilbert) http://news.gilbert.org

Video

- *Web 2.0 ... Web 2.0 ... The Machine is Us/ing Us* (Kansas State University, 2007) www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gmP4nk0EOE

● KEY SOCIAL NETWORKING TERMS

**Contributed by David Wilcox, Designing for Civil Society, www.designingforcivilsociety.org
A longer version and practical advice is available at:
http://socialmedia.wikispaces.com/A-Z+of+social+media**

Aggregation is the process of gathering and remixing content from blogs and other websites that provide RSS feeds. The results may be displayed in an aggregator website like Bloglines, or directly on your desktop using software often also called a newsreader.

Authenticity is the sense that something or someone is real. Blogs enable people to publish content, and engage in conversations, that show their interests and values, and so help develop an authentic voice online.

Blogs are websites with dated items of content in reverse chronological order, self-published by bloggers. Items – sometimes called posts – may have keyword tags associated with them, are usually available as feeds, and often allow commenting.

Bookmarking is saving the address of a website or item of content, either in your brower, or on a social bookmarking site like del.icio.us. If you add tags, others can easily use your research too.

A **browser** is the tool used to view websites, and access all the content available there onscreen or by downloading. Browsers may also be used to upload or otherwise contribute content to a blog or other website.

Bulletin boards were the early vehicles for online collaboration, where users connected with a central computer to post and read email-like messages. They were the electronic equivalent of public notice boards. The term is still used for forums.

Chat is interaction on a web site, with a number of people adding text items one after the other into the same space at (almost) the same time. A place for chat – chat room – differs from a forum because conversations happen in 'real time', rather as they do face-to-face.

Collaboration: social media tools from email lists to virtual worlds offer enormous scope for collaboration. Low-risk activities like commenting, social bookmarking, chatting and blogging help develop the trust necessary for collaboration.

Commitment: the 'social' aspect of social media means that tools are most useful when other people commit to using them too. Commitment will depend on people's degree of interest in a subject, capability online, preparedness to share with others, degree of comfort in a new place, as well as the usability of the site or tool.

Online **communities** are groups of people communicating mainly through the internet. They may simply have a shared interest to talk about ... or more formally learn from each other and find solutions as a Community of Practice. Online communities may use email lists or forums, where content is centralised. Communities may also emerge from conversations around or between bloggers.

Content is used here to describe text, pictures, video and any other meaningful material that is on the internet.

Control: social networking is difficult to control because if people can't say something in one place they can blog or comment elsewhere. That can be challenging for hierarchical organisations used to centrally-managed websites.

Conversation through blogging, commenting or contributing to forums is the currency of social networking.

Copyright: sharing through social media is enhanced by attaching a Creative Commons license specifying, for example, that content may be re-used with attribution, provided that a similar license is then attached by the new author.

Crowdsourcing refers to harnessing the skills and enthusiasm of those outside an organisation who are prepared to volunteer their time contributing content and solving problems.

Culture: social media only works well in a culture of openness, where people are prepared to share. For that reason, commitment and attitude are as important as tools.

To **download** is to retrieve a file or other content from an internet site to your computer or other device. See Upload.

Email lists, or groups, are important networking tools offering the facility to 'starburst' a message from a central postbox to any number of subscribers, and for them to respond. Lists usually also offer a facility for reading and replying through a web page – so they can also operate like forums.

Face-to-face (f2f) is used to describe people meeting offline. While social media may reduce the need to meet, direct contact gives far more clues, quickly, about a person than you can get online. Online interaction is likely to be richer after f2f meetings.

Feeds are the means by which you can read, view or listen to items from blogs and other RSS-enabled sites without visiting the site, by subscribing and using an aggregator or newsreader. Feeds contain the content of an item and any associated tags without the design or structure of a web page.

Forums are discussion areas on websites, where people can post messages or comment on existing messages asynchronously – that is, independently of time or place time. Chat is the synchronous equivalent.

Groups are collections of individuals with some sense of unity through their activities, interests or values. They are bounded: you are in a group, or not. They differ in this from networks, which are dispersed, and defined by nodes and connections.

Instant messaging (IM) is chat with one other person.

Links are the highlighted text or images that, when clicked, jump you from one web page or item of content to another. Bloggers use links a lot when writing, to reference their own or other content.

Lurkers are people who read but don't contribute or add comments to forums. The one per cent rule-of-thumb suggests about one per cent of people contribute new content to an online community, another nine percent comment, and the rest lurk. However, this may not be a passive role because content read on forums may spark interaction elsewhere.

Membership involves belonging to a group. Networking can offer some of the benefits of group membership, without the need for as much central co-ordination. A rise in networking may present challenges for organisations who depend on membership for funds or to demonstrate their credibility.

Networks are structures defined by nodes and the connections between them. In social networks the nodes are people, and the connections are the relationships that they have. Networking is the process by which you develop and strengthen those relationships.

Newsreader see aggregator.

Offline means not online, that is, not connected to the Internet. It may refer to an unconnected computer, or activities taking place without the benefit (or perhaps distraction) of a connection.

Online means being connected to the internet, and also being there in the sense of reading or producing content.

Openness is being prepared to share and collaborate – something aided by social media. Open source software – developed collaboratively with few constraints on its use – is a technical example. In order to be open online you may offer share-alike copyright licenses, and you may tag content and link generously to other people's content. This demonstrates open source thinking.

Peer to peer refers to direct interaction between two people in a network. In that network, each peer will be connected to other peers, opening the opportunity for further sharing and learning.

A **platform** is the framework or system within which tools work. That platform may be as broad as mobile telephony, or as narrow as a piece of software that has different modules like blogs, forums, and wikis in a suite of tools. As more and more tools operate 'out there' on the web, rather than on your desktop, people refer to the internet as the platform.

A **podcast** is audio or video content that can be downloaded automatically through a subscription to a website so you can view or listen offline.

Profiles are the information that you provide about yourself when signing up for a social networking site. As well as a picture and basic information, this may include your personal and business interests, a 'blurb' about yourself, and tags to help people search for like-minded people.

Remixing: social media offers the possibility of taking different items of content, identified by tags and published through feeds, and combining them in different ways. You can do this with other people's content if they add an appropriate copyright license.

Roles: parties need hosting, committees need chairing, working groups may need facilitation. Online networks and communities need support from people who may be called, for example, technology stewards or network weavers. Champions are the core group of enthusiasts you need to start a community.

RSS is short for Really Simple Syndication. This allows you to subscribe to content on blogs and other social media and have it delivered to you through a feed.

Searching for information on the Net is done using a search engine, of which Google is the best known. Specialist search engines like Technorati concentrate on blogs. As well as searching by word or phrase you can search on tags, and so find content others have keyworded.

Sharing is offering other people the use of your text, images, video, bookmarks or other content by adding tags, and applying copyright licenses that encourage use of content.

Social media is a terms for the tools and platforms people use to publish, converse and share content online. The tools include blogs, wikis, podcasts, and sites to share photos and bookmarks.

Social networking sites are online places where users can create a profile for themselves, and then socialise with others using a range of social media tools including blogs, video, images, tagging, lists of friends, forums and messaging.

Stories, as well as conversations, are a strong theme in blogging. Anecdotes, bits of gossip and longer narratives work particularly well on blogs if they have a personal angle. It helps others get to know the blogger – and helps the blogger find and extend their voice.

Subscribing is the process of adding an RSS feed to your aggregator or newsreader. It's the online equivalent of signing up for a magazine, but usually free.

Tags are keywords attached to a blog post, bookmark, photo or other item of content so you and others can find them easily through searches and aggregation.

Tool is used here as shorthand for a software applications on your computer, and also for applications that are Web-based.

Trackback: some blogs provide a facility for other bloggers to leave a calling card automatically, instead of commenting. Blogger A may write on blog A about an item on blogger B's site, and through the trackback facility leave a link on B's site back to A. The collection of comments and trackbacks on a site facilitates conversations.

To **upload** is to transfer a file or other content from your computer to an internet site.

User generated content is text, photos and other material produced by people who previously just consumed. See content.

Virtual worlds are online places like Second Life, where you can create a representation of yourself (an avatar) and socialise with other residents. Basic activity is free, but you can buy currency (using real money) in order to purchase land and trade with other residents. Second Life is being used by some voluntary organisations to run discussions, virtual events and fundraising.

Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) enables you to use a computer or other internet device for phone calls without additional charge.

Web 2.0 is a term coined by O'Reilly Media in 2004 to describe blogs, wikis, social networking sites and other internet-based services that emphasise collaboration and sharing, rather than less interactive publishing (Web 1.0). It is associated with the idea of the internet as a platform.

A **wiki** is a web page – or set of pages – that can be edited collaboratively. The best-known example is Wikipedia, an encyclopedia created by thousands of contributors across the world. Once people have appropriate permissions – set by the wiki owner – they can create pages and/or add to and alter existing pages.

● THIRD SECTOR FORESIGHT

NCVO Third Sector Foresight helps voluntary and community organisations to identify and understand the strategic drivers that affect them and provides tools to help organisations transform this understanding into robust strategies that can directly improve their effectiveness.

Voluntary Sector Strategic Analysis

This annual publication provides concise and relevant information about trends affecting the VCS, analysis of the implications and suggested strategic actions.

> *"This is invaluable to me as a Chief Executive of a small/medium sized non-profit organisation, because it gives me access to thinking on strategy I could not possibly find within my limited resources."*

Tools for Tomorrow –
a practical guide to strategic planning for voluntary organisations

This toolkit provides step-by-step guidance to small and medium-sized organisations.

> *"This good value guide will be refreshing and challenging for those organisations that have an established cycle for business planning. I wish that this guide had been put into my hands seven years ago as I began to lead a medium-sized, local charity into more strategic growth and development."*

Foresight Network

The free Foresight Network was set up to disseminate regular information about strategic issues to leaders and planners in the VCS, and to facilitate peer support and knowledge sharing.

> *"I found it very useful, especially the trends section. I often work with groups who have no idea about future trends and need to be encouraged to look outside their own four walls, so 'seed' information from a variety of areas is particularly useful both as an example and a starting point."*
>
> – (from a CVS)

Third Sector Foresight Seminar Series

These free seminars provide space and time for leaders to explore and discuss strategic issues and share knowledge and ideas with their peers. Seminars have been held on: the changing economic landscape; changing regulation and perceptions of risk; strategy renewal during periods of growth; the impact of the Pensions Commission report on the VCS; and, local government reform.

Online database of drivers and trends – going live in 2007

We are currently building an online database which will provide a useful source of analysis and data on drivers and trends to help VCOs understand their environment, how it is changing and the impact on their organisation.

www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/3s4

● ICT HELP FOR FRONTLINE ORGANISATIONS

The ICT Hub provides a range of no cost and low cost services to help voluntary and community sector organisations benefit from ICT including new media technology.

The ICT Hub is a partnership of national voluntary and community organisations and the partners are AbilityNet, IT4Communities, LASA, NAVCA and NCVO.

The ICT Hub's resources are for very small, small and medium-sized voluntary and community sector organisations. To find out more about the ICT Hub visit:
www.icthub.org.uk or call freephone 0800 652 4737

"Well managed information and communications technology (ICT) can save time and money – and increase innovation"

No cost and low cost ICT training and seminars

The ICT Hub in partnership with the Media Trust is offering a series of free afternoon events around England to increase the voluntary and community sector's knowledge of new media and inspire the sector to make use of blogs, podcasts, video and other online resources. For further information about these and other new media events visit the events section of the ICT Hub's website.

ICT Publications

For useful and informative publications on ICT for voluntary and community organisations visit the publications section of the ICT Hub's website.

ICT website of good practice resources

The ICT Hub's online knowledgebase is a comprehensive, online source of practical help, information, and independent advice on ICT, for small and medium-sized voluntary and community sector organisations. Knowledgebase can be used for:

- Help with developing websites and databases
- Help with developing ICT policies and strategies
- Information on how to make your computer accessible for people with disabilities
- Support with software and hardware
- How to set up and manage networks
- Visit the knowledgebase section of the ICT Hub's website to find out more.

Free help with a media volunteer

The ICT Hub is supporting the Media Trust and IT4Communities to broker more volunteering opportunities to help frontline organisations benefit from new media. To find a volunteer to help your organisation take advantage of new media visit the ICT Hub's website how we can help – volunteering and new media sections.

Research into the ICT needs of the sector

Explore findings in the research section on the ICT Hub's website, to find out more about the ICT funding needs of the sector, and the take up of, and attitudes to, ICT.

www.icthub.org.uk

NCVO

giving voice and support to voluntary and community organisations

This publication can be made available in large print and alternative formats on request.

Please contact NCVO on 020 7713 6161 for more information.

ict hub

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