(Un)civil Discourse in Nonprofits' Use of Web 2.0

Robert W. McEachern, Southern Connecticut State University

As more nonprofit organizations take advantage of the ease of creating an online presence, they need to understand the fundamental nature of Web 2.0: its interactivity between writers and readers. The "(un)civil discourse" that often comes from such interactivity results in an inherent lack of control for writers and their organizations. However, the nonprofits that most successfully use Web 2.0 technologies to enhance their missions are those that accept and even embrace this lack of control, finding ways to use it productively to improve their advocacy and empower their supporters and clients.

Nonprofit organizations have traditionally been slow to employ newer technologies; this has been particularly true of smaller nonprofits, the kind with two or three employees and many volunteers, but without a separate marketing and public relations department. A perpetual lack of funding for basic services, as well as a lack of expertise among already thinly stretched professional and volunteer staffs, often make cutting-edge technology a "luxury" for these small nonprofits (Rigby). Recently, however, nonprofit organizations have begun to embrace emerging technologies, as computer hardware and software have become much less expensive and much more user-friendly (Clerico). Creating a Facebook page for a nonprofit, for example, requires little money and virtually no technological expertise.

While both nonprofit and for-profit organizations have embraced this new form of communication, nonprofit organizations are particularly suited to using the "(un)civil discourse" that comes from this interactivity. While this term is open to interpretation, I define (un)civil discourse at its most basic as the type of conversation that results from the interactivity inherent in Web 2.0 applications. This conversation is sometimes raw, often unfocused, frequently derogatory, and not always interested in following polite rules such as turn-taking and rational thinking that are implied by the term "civil discourse" (as defined, for example, by Crowley). As a result, for many organizations, the first impulse is to exert some kind of control over the conversation; this seems especially true of for-profit organizations, given the ownership interests inherent in a for-profit organization. (For two well-known examples, Tapscott and William's discussion of the Lego Group, and Levinson's discussion of AMC television (53-54); in both instances, the initial impulse of the corporation was to control the use of their products by customers, brought about by Web 2.0, which made it easy for customers to manipulate the products in ways the companies did not intend. While both businesses eventually relented, and even embraced the interactivity of Web 2.0, their initial impulse is quite common).

Nonprofit organizations, because of the absence of a profit motive, are more apt to benefit from (un)civil discourse. They can be not only open to the dialogue that comes from such interactivity, but embrace the consequences of the (often messy) conversation, using the resulting dialogue to further their missions. In this article, I will describe the results of some of my research into the ways that writers in nonprofit organizations use Web 2.0 applications. Through interviews with those writers and analysis of their online writing, I found that when writers in nonprofits accepted the interactive nature of Web 2.0, they were not only successful in fulfilling their organizations' missions, but in some cases, moved beyond those missions by creating opportunities for empowering their supporters and clients.

What is Web 2.0?

To understand (un)civil discourse, you need to understand Web 2.0.

Perhaps the most appropriate source for a definition of Web 2.0 is from Wikipedia. While many teachers cringe at the idea of using Wikipedia as a source, the online encyclopedia is actually the perfect example of a Web 2.0 technology, given its reliance on input from its users. Wikipedia defines Web 2.0 as "web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web…. A Web 2.0 site allows its users to interact with other users or to change website content, in contrast to non-interactive websites where users are limited to the passive viewing of information that is provided to them" ("Web 2.0").

Wikis (like Wikipedia) are but one type of Web 2.0 application. Others include blogs, micro-blogs (like Twitter), social networks (like Facebook or LinkedIn), photo- and video-sharing sites (like Flikr and YouTube), social bookmarking sites (like Delicious), and virtual worlds (like Second Life). What they all have in common is their interactivity. For example, blogs allow for readers to post comments on what they read; social networks encourage associations to be made between Friends or Contacts, resulting in other peoples' writing being posted to one's own site; and wikis allow readers to revise, edit, and otherwise change material that has been posted on someone else's site.

Wikipedia's definition of "Web 2.0" highlights not only the interactivity between writers and readers that is the hallmark of Web 2.0, but makes clear the distinction between such sites and the generation of web sites that preceded them: Web 1.0, the "non-interactive websites where users are limited to the passive viewing of information that is provided to them." As the full Wikipedia article acknowledges, the term "Web 2.0" grew out of the O'Reilly Media Conference of 2004, with its now-famous "brainstorming session" that resulted in a list of examples of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. In an article that followed the conference, Tim O'Reilly further explained what Web 2.0 was (and arguably continues to be): While Yahoo! began as an example of Web 1.0, providing a top-down directory of web sites, Delicious, as a social bookmarking or "folksonomy" site, is organized by categories that are created by its users. Similarly, while the web version of the *Times Literary Supplement* would provide solicited reviews of books (Web 1.0), Amazon.com allows its users to provide reviews themselves and thus create a user-generated ranking system (Web 2.0). And of course, while Encyclopedia Britannica Online allows for easier access to expert-written material (Web 1.0), Wikipedia relies on "crowd-sourcing" (Web 2.0) to harness collective knowledge in the writing and editing about a topic.

Paul Levinson explains the Web 1.0/Web 2.0 difference by distinguishing "Old Media," "New Media," and "New New Media." Old Media, he says, existed before the web was created. "New Media" are examples of old media (like the *New York Times*) that have been placed on the web (as NewYorkTimes.com). While this migration did result in some reader control (since "people can use, enjoy, and benefit from them on the user's rather than the medium's timetable, once the content has been posted online"), ultimate control lies in the hands of the owners of the web site. "New New Media," according to Levinson, allows for the user to create content, either through separate original postings, or through comments or other interactions with an existing site (3-4). New Media (Web 1.0) refuses to yield control of content, while New New Media (Web 2.0) allows for content creation by a user.

From Monologue to Conversation: Celiacs United

Web 2.0, then, is the space where (un)civil discourse exists: where an organization, and thus the writers that represent it, can publish their words, trace the reactions of readers through their comments and/or editing, and respond to those reactions. The sometimes frustrating part for a writer (and for her organization) is the need to give up control.

Certainly, the idea of a writer not fully controlling her words has been around for some time. We have long known that the meaning of a document comes from the interaction of the writer's text and the reader (see, for example, Rosenblatt). However, this idea has always been somewhat theoretical, or at least unobservable – something that takes place within a reader's head. So while a writer's words would change when those words were processed in the mind of a reader, the writer did at least have control of which words were presented to readers for their consumption.

What Web 2.0 applications have changed is they have made this theoretical, unobservable process into something concrete and visible. Whereas in the past, a writer for a nonprofit organization might send out a fundraising letter and never hear directly from a reader, now the writer might post that same message on her organization's blog and then see how potential donors respond to that posting by reading their comments, or by following a non-organization-sponsored forum where potential donors trade opinions about the content of her letter, or by searching for her organization's name and following supporters' Twitter feeds.

While lack of control can be a source of potential difficulties, I found in my research that it becomes a problem only when it is resisted. In discussing Web 2.0-based writing with employees of nonprofits, I found that the organizations that were most successfully using Web 2.0 (even if only by their own standards) were those that found ways to exist within the interactivity.

For example, one nonprofit I studied is focused on providing assistance to people with gluten allergies and sensitivities, and is called CU, for Celiacs United[1]. CU was founded in 1998 by Karen, whose child's

1 To maintain anonymity of my research subjects, the names of individuals and organizations have been changed. In some instances, details of interviews and online writing samples have also been changed slightly to avoid revealing any identifying information; however, the substance of the interviews and writing has remained unchanged.

Celiac Disease was misdiagnosed for several years. The organization's mission was and remains to facilitate support for people with the disease. While Karen was not a medical expert in the area (her background was in business), she made sure that CU had from the start a Medical Advisory Board with experts in the field – researchers and clinicians who understood the disease.

Over time, Karen brought CU from a Web 1.0 environment to a Web 2.0 environment. CU began as a web site and listserv, with Karen writing articles for the site and disseminating information through the listserv. Eventually, she changed the listserv to an online forum, allowing users to interact with one another more closely online. Soon, she saw the potential that Web 2.0 applications had for facilitating conversations, and she created Facebook and Twitter accounts while maintaining the forums.

A typical exchange on CU's Facebook page involves a newcomer who has recently been diagnosed with Celiac who is looking for advice and support. While in the past, someone in that situation could have visited the CU website and searched the site until she found the information she needed, she can now post on the CU Facebook page with specific questions, get answers from a CU representative, and follow up with any other questions. The Web 2.0 applications allow for much greater interaction. More importantly, the interaction has allowed Karen to fulfill another of her goals: creating opportunities for people with Celiac Disease to meet face-to-face as well as online. By advertising a series of support groups and Celiac-friendly social events, Karen has been able to bring people together to support one another. This not only supplements the support she is able to offer through the organization, but does so in a way that empowers those with Celiac by allowing them to organize on their own, in locations that are physically too far away from Karen to be able to oversee them herself.

Because CU began as a Web 1.0 venture, Karen admits to being "guarded" about some uncontrolled interactions, such as conversations posted on Facebook. Still, she has come to embrace the (un)civil discourse that she has created through CU. She finds that while some other Celiac Disease-related sites have a "Wild West atmosphere," as she put it, the CU online sites have a "warm, fuzzy feel" to them. She speculates that this is because most of the people who find CU on Facebook or Twitter are looking for support. While "guarded" at first, Karen eventually found that embracing Web 2.0 made for a richer experience for all of her users, allowing everyone to learn from one another's experiences.

When (Un)Civil Discourse becomes Uncivil: Research on Cancer Knowledge

While Karen's online experience with CU has been uniformly positive, the interactivity and giving up of control that comes with Web 2.0 environments can cause problems, including the possibility of propagating misinformation, a common concern in crowd-sourcing (Swaine). For nonprofit organizations whose missions involve more than just support, factual information becomes important, and the willingness to give up control becomes more complex.

One writer in such a situation is Zelda, a volunteer for Research on Cancer Knowledge, also known as ROCK, an organization with multiple missions: to empower cancer patients to learn as much about their disease as possible; to encourage the use of science-based research to counter potentially harmful myths about cancer and its treatment; to advocate for cancer research funding; and to provide emotional support for cancer patients.

In 2008, Zelda, a cancer survivor herself who serves on the board of directors for ROCK, volunteered to become more directly active with the organization's online efforts, and set up a ROCK page on Facebook and a Twitter account. Zelda serves as the only writer for these two Web 2.0

applications for ROCK; at the time of our interviews, she was devoting 2-3 hours per day to these efforts, on top of her full-time job in the finance sector. Much of Zelda's work on Facebook involves providing information to ROCK's Facebook Friends through links to news items and medical journal articles related to cancer, sending messages of support to Friends who post news about their own cancer journeys, and generally serving to publicize ROCK and its mission.

An occasional source of conflict for Zelda involves one of ROCK's principle goals: its advocacy of science-based research about cancer. Many of Zelda's Facebook posts include links to articles from websites that debunk cancer myths. For example, Zelda once posted on the ROCK page a warning about e-mails that were making the rounds that touted the cancer-curing properties of asparagus. Along with the warning, Zelda posted links to scientific articles and other sites that explained in plain English why asparagus is good for you, and has some antioxidant properties, but also explaining that such properties have not been subject to clinical experiments that would show definitively that they could cure cancer, plus a link to an article that says, in fact, that antioxidants might actually lower the effectiveness of certain types of chemotherapy. Several Facebook Friends commented on the post, some expressing annoyance at receiving The Asparagus E-mail themselves, others thanking Zelda for the information, and still others mentioning additional e-mails they'd received with false claims about cancer cures. Responding to the last group, Zelda posted additional links to sites that debunk myths of all kinds, including cancer cures. So while ROCK has long maintained a web page for people to find information, the Facebook page allows Zelda to respond immediately to peoples' needs with links to other sources of information, particularly the kind of science-based information that is so vital to ROCK's mission.

Such postings are often made by Zelda on her own initiative; she finds that "content curation," or finding, filtering, and posting information for her readers, is an important part of the job. But other postings related to

ROCK's promotion of science-based information come from (un)civil discourse, where Zelda responds to things that Friends have posted on the ROCK page. Zelda occasionally posts what she calls "fun links;" she says the exchanges on Facebook are often so grim and serious (it is very common for ROCK's Facebook Friends to post about treatments that are not working for them, along with pleas for help with suggested courses of action) that she occasionally wants to provide information that is both fun and useful. She once posted a link to a humorous video on how to make cupcakes in a healthier way, using less sugar. A Facebook Friend named Hannah posted a comment to this link in which she recommended the cupcakes be made without any sugar at all, substituting natural agave syrup instead, discussing the dangers of table sugar and suggesting that her own sugar-free diet was responsible for her cancer being cured several years before. This poster, it turned out, was a well-known member of the cancer community. Zelda admitted to me that, had it been anyone else, she would have seriously considered deleting the comment relating sugar and cancer. But this poster was too well known and admired to do that, and people would have noticed that Hannah's posting had been deleted. Instead, Zelda posted a response in which she agreed that agave syrup can be used to make some delicious treats. But she then followed up with a reference to ROCK's science-based mission, saying, "You know how things work around here, Hannah! You gotta back things up with evidence! I was cured [of my cancer], too, and I have plenty of sugar in my diet!"

As it was for Zelda, the challenge for all of the writers I interviewed was in finding ways to control the conversation without being too controlling. Zelda avoids censoring any posts. Although she is willing to delete information that is harmfully untrue, she is much more likely to engage people in public conversation as a way of maintaining openness while still staying true to ROCK's mission, valuing the (un)civil discourse that results. Unlike the ROCK web site, which provides static (though updated) information, the organization's Facebook page allows for an open exchange of ideas, opinions, and experiences.

On the Ground: The Needs Bank

Both Karen's CU and Zelda's ROCK exist almost entirely in cyberspace; while they do have some off-line presence, the organizations fulfill their missions through online interactions. Their online existence certainly highlights the issues that are discussed here, emphasizing the need to engage in (un)civil discourse, which is much more likely to occur online than face-to-face. Without embracing the messiness of these conversations, their organizations likely wouldn't exist. But such an embracing of interactivity is also important for nonprofits whose missions exist "on the ground." As with CU and ROCK, their interactivity with others online can supplement their offline work, and needs to be embraced in order to be successful.

MaryAnn is director of a nonprofit called The Needs Bank, an expanded version of a traditional food bank that also provides needy families with personal care items such as diapers, toothpaste, and deodorant, which they cannot buy with Food Stamps. MaryAnn is one of two employees of The Needs Bank; the other is an administrative assistant. Shortly before I interviewed MaryAnn, The Needs Bank had kicked off a diaper drive, asking people in the community for donations of disposable diapers to distribute to needy families with infants and toddlers.

As part of the diaper campaign, MaryAnn wrote a blog entry for the website of the local nonprofit coalition, describing the diaper drive and its importance to people who cannot afford diapers, highlighting the number of newly unemployed in the community. The blog posting did not receive any comments on the coalition's website, but MaryAnn did post links to the blog entry on The Needs Bank's Facebook and Twitter pages, which did receive a number of comments from supporters of the nonprofit. Soon, the blog entry was also picked up by the local newspaper, which did a story on The Needs Bank and its diaper drive, quoting from the blog entry and providing a link to the entry in the news story that appeared on the newspaper's online version. MaryAnn then linked the newspaper story on the Facebook page.

The online version of the newspaper story *did* receive comments – many of them. Some were from conservative-leaning activists who criticized The Needs Bank for "wasting money on lazy people on welfare who refuse to work." Others were from left-leaning activists who criticized The Needs Bank for encouraging the use of disposable diapers, which were "bad for the environment." Many, from both sides, were what might fit a more conventional definition of "uncivil," using harsh terms to criticize The Needs Bank, its supporters, and its clients.

To sum that up: One blog entry that didn't receive comments, linked to three different sites that all did receive comments. A few years ago, MaryAnn would not have had the direct interaction with readers that she had here, for better or for worse. The blog entry would not have existed, and neither would the Facebook or Twitter entries. The newspaper article would have been in print only, and other than an occasional angry letter or phone call, The Needs Bank likely would not have received any other feedback from people who were unhappy with her organization's mission, particularly those who were not directly affected by it. Instead, because of her organization's Web 2.0 presence, MaryAnn was able to get a much better sense of people's reactions to her writing. Future communication from The Needs Bank, both web-based and paper-based, was improved by this interaction, allowing MaryAnn to anticipate and respond to criticism and emphasize certain other points. Particularly in her public presentations about her organization, MaryAnn was able to discuss the objections that people had and explain why, for example, disposable diapers did have an effect on the environment, but that clients were unlikely to have washing machines, and would need to haul dirty diapers to a laundromat, possibly on public transportation, and would thus likely change their babies' diapers even less often, which could at best cause diaper rash and at worst cause serious physical problems.

While the incident was ultimately helpful for MaryAnn as a writer, it would seem that The Needs Bank as an organization would be harmed by negative publicity from two opposite sources. In the end, though, just the opposite happened, and the (un)civil discourse resulted in The Needs Bank meeting some of its goals.

The negative comments came from "outsiders," people who were not necessarily invested in The Needs Bank's success. But seeing those comments galvanized those "insiders" who did support the organization. In an almost protective gesture, Facebook friends began to increase their comments on MaryAnn's subsequent posts, even if only to add a comment like "Yeah!" to an update about a shipment of a food donation to The Needs Bank's warehouse. Given the nature of a social network, more people began to see the postings that their Facebook Friends made to The Needs Bank's page, and the organization's popularity began to grow. Within nine months, the number of people who became Facebook Fans of the Needs Bank jumped from about 400 to over 3000. Certainly not all of this increase came about in response to this particular situation, but it was certainly helped by it, as more Facebook Friends became aware of their Friends' support for The Needs Bank.

More importantly, one of MaryAnn's goals for The Needs Bank's foray into social media was met: in addition to volunteers and donators, more and more new Facebook Friends were clients – people in the community who turned to The Needs Bank for food and personal care items, and the Facebook page became not just a place to celebrate large donations or ask for volunteers, but a place for people to ask for help. The following is a typical exchange on The Needs Bank's page: MaryAnn posts a news item such as "Joe and Lenny are packing the truck to deliver diapers! Should be unloaded in Elmer by 9:30 and then on to Columbia by noon!" This is followed by a comment from a Friend: "where in Columbia I need diapers ASAP! Please tell me where I can pick them up." This is then followed by The Needs Bank's comment with the name and address of the agency that could help the client.

More impressively, many clients would get responses from other Facebook Friends before a Needs Bank representative could respond. One such exchange:

> Hey. I just found you all. How do you find out how and where to go get help getting diapers I know many that can't afford them and have to scrape up money to get enough to buy a small pack that doesn't last. And what about when someone has 2 babies in diapers at the same time. A free pack of diapers ever now and then sure would help. What really would help if Food Stamps would let you get them. We live in another state. Know where we can get them or a number? Thnx.

This was followed by a Needs Bank supporter who responded, "Click on the Needs Bank logo at the top of the page. You'll find a list of agencies by state that can help."

Conclusion: Embracing the (Un)civil

Web 2.0's interactivity is a good thing, on the whole, providing readers, supporters, and clients a voice. But it can be difficult for organizations and their writers to give up a good deal of control in order to begin, sustain, and benefit from the conversation. It is this giving up of control that potentially creates problems: writers who continue to subscribe to older models of top-down, expert-driven communication will end up with unsatisfied readers, who increasingly expect a voice when they engage with organizations. When they are not given the opportunity, or when their voices are taken away, their attitude toward an organization can quickly turn negative. For a nonprofit, this could even mean the loss of supporters.

This was not the case with the organizations that I studied. In my research, writers and their organizations were most successful when they embraced this conversation, even when they encountered hostility. It is common for organizations, both nonprofit and for-profit, to attempt to control their readers' voices. One large nonprofit I examined (but did not conduct interviews with) did have a blog on its webpage, but comments were not posted automatically, as with many blogs; instead, comments needed to be e-mailed to the organization, which would then (presumably) choose which to post. Given the nature of the organization (they lobby state governments to change laws dealing with homosexuality), such public contact with those for whom they are advocating might not be necessary; supporters might be able to share information about themselves by private e-mail. Furthermore, it is possible that allowing a public forum on its blog would only result in homophobic remarks being broadcast on the blog, which might ultimately harm their mission instead of enhancing it. (I will again emphasize that I did not interview anyone from this organization, and thus reasoning is only speculation.)

In contrast, none of the writers I interviewed advocated censoring those who commented on their pages. MaryAnn, from The Needs Bank, said she would never censor someone on Facebook or Twitter; she thought that doing so would betray the whole point of using Web 2.0 applications, which convey a sense of openness that she sees as vital to her organization's mission. This is why she has never erased any comments from readers, no matter how negative. CU's Karen, though more guarded than the others I studied, has not had to censor anyone, enjoying the supportive dialogue that comes to her site. And Zelda, while admitting that she does need to deal with people who post information that is contradictory to the mission of ROCK, prefers to engage in open dialogue as a way of exposing problems and reasoning them out, and thus reinforcing the point she wants readers to understand.

As a result of their openness, all three organizations have experienced a change in their online presence. Instead of the static, information-giving model of Web 1.0, in which the organization is the sole provider of information, all three nonprofits discussed here were able to create an atmosphere in which volunteers, supporters, donors, and clients shared in the providing of information and support. It took some time for that openness to evolve, as each writer and each organization learned to gradually give up control over the words that appeared under their banners. But the result was an even greater enhancement of their missions than they had perhaps originally intended when they ventured into Web 2.0. All three nonprofits, to some extent, seek to increase empowerment for those that they serve: all three seek to find ways to help their clients help themselves. By allowing their clients and supporters to be sources of information, not just recipients of it, the organizations empower them to become experts – to become part of the solution. The path is messy, but (un)civil discourse is a necessary part of the solution.

Nonprofit organizations that are interested in exploring the Web 2.0 environment, or that are already there but not satisfied with the results, would do well to consider the experiences of the writers above. Soon, having a Web 2.0 presence will be required of organizations, and its "Wild West" atmosphere, as Karen put it, will not likely go away: discourse will remain (un)civil. The lesson that these three writers learned was that the best approach to that (un)civil discourse, even when it turns uncivil, is to embrace it, learn from it, and use it to further their organizations' missions.

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