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**DRAFT**

## **Leadership and Social Media “New” Architectures of Change**

**An essay by Elissa Perry  
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We as a people, and our communication tools, are on a path to bring the individual and the collective back into balance and planning for this is both seemingly impossible and necessary. This path seems like the logical progression, the printing press enabled the amplification of the individual voice and led to the publishing of lots of small, extremely localized papers. Telecommunications or more specifically the telephone expanded that possibility to two-way communications. And now, social media tools, also known as web 2.0 or the social web, are amplifying groups. Broadcast, two-way and multi-way communications are possible across geographic boundaries and when communicating visually, even across boundaries of language.

### **Where we've been**

For decades telephones, which allowed for the most part, a person to talk to another person, and broadcast communications, where there was little ability if

any to talk back, proliferated. And don't get me wrong this was exciting stuff. Kids are still excited when they are old enough to answer the phone and make phone calls. The limitations of these tools though, kept the ability to have a conversation or organize on a grand scale to requiring coordination by an organization or a coordinated group of organizations. Unions, associations, nonprofits, formed to coordinate people and change efforts. Paid employees literate in the language of multiple media, print and broadcast were charged with that piece of coordinating a change effort. That we as a people do want to affect change is clear, the number of nonprofits has grown exponentially in the last 50+ years. Prior to 1950 there were 152,000 nonprofits in the U.S. In 1986 there were 1,084,939 and 20 years later in 2006, there were 1,478,194 – a change of 36.2%. The number of Foundations almost doubled in the same 20-year period going from approximately 59,000 to approximately 110,000 (National Center for Charitable Statistics). During this time, outreach and marketing teams armed with the message written by the communications team went out to engage individuals and their pocketbooks. Now of course many organizations also have development teams whose sole purpose is to use the marketing messages to gather money to fund the organizations. This has become the norm.

Curious though is that since 2006, the number of nonprofits has actually decreased for the first time since the 1950s. As of January 2008 there are 1,469,667 registered nonprofits. About 8,500 nonprofits have disappeared in a little over a year. This number may fluctuate in the next few years, however I predict it will continue to go down.

### **So, is there less connecting happening?**

I would say no, there is actually more. Many factors are contributing to this change in the number of organizations, such as the rise of change-minded social entrepreneurship, a corporate social responsibility movement, and fewer young people taking jobs or staying in jobs in the nonprofit sector as others move on or retire. However, what is playing a large role, the factor examined here, is our tendency toward social interaction and collectivism along with the enabling affect of social media on the ability of people to work together for change in ways that reduce the need for the organization as it has historically existed.

For years we as a culture, and our media, have been telling the hero stories having to do with the bootstraps, ingenuity and the American Dream. Horatio Alger, Madame CJ Walker, Oprah and Bill Gates are some of the main characters that have dominated the landscape. Now we are beginning to hear more about

other narratives that are group focused, Move On.org, Meet.Up.com, ice cream protests in Belarus, Blackberries under Burkas in Kuwait, blog feeds from soldiers in Iraq, photo streams from Darfur, and video from Burma/Myanmar. It's not that organizations or individuals are going away but the traditional 501(c)3 as we have conceived of it for the last 50 years is becoming less relevant; and, individual, heroic leadership styles are having to come more into balance with the collective.

What do we mean by the collective? One of the defining factors of what scholar Paul Robeson, Jr. defines as Black Culture is that "I is not more important than we." This tenet is not exclusive to Black Culture or Robeson, Jr.'s definition of it. Most ethnic cultures (we all have one) refer to a similar value as a part of its fiber. This "we" to which we are all responsible and to which we all belong is the collective. In the past one of the most important things collectives emerged around was ethnicity and geographic region. Then there was one's trade or profession and also one's interests and abilities, and ways to organize around these factors proliferated.

The ACLU, of all organizations, reacted in a most contradictory and confusing manner to its members self-organizing in the beginning. Some of the civil rights organization's members in a chapter-less region proposed to get together and

began doing do. The ACLU's headquarters found out about it and sent a cease and desist letter to meetup.com, the website the members used to find each other and set up a meeting. The organization then wanted to have representatives there and control the messages sent out to the group. Scott Heiferman, founder of Meetup.com, says that he literally just laughed. The ACLU of all people didn't get it at first. Sending them a cease and desist was like trying to stop Microsoft because someone used its email and calendaring program to organize a meeting or Adobe because someone used its desktop publishing software to make a flyer. As the ACLU eventually learned, it's not about the tools (and the ACLU is now a great model of the possibilities for organizing and the social web).

### **Enabled by the We**

There are a great many tools making up what's becoming known as the social web; and whether one refers to them as "web 2.0" or something else, their impact on how we create change is much deeper and profound than any catchy name might suggest. Michael Rogers wrote of the 2006 NetSquared conference in his MSNBC.com column (10:43 a.m. PT June 13, 2006 <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13230538/from/ET/>) that despite a lack of hype in the mainstream media, this gathering of 370 philanthropists, nonprofit and non-

governmental organizations, humanitarian services and charities—along with technology developers and other “digerati” — was really one of the more influential conferences of the year. The main focus of the gathering, which has as its tagline “Remixing the web for social change,” was exploring how the social web could be and is being leveraged for creating positive impact around a number of global equity and justice issues. “[I]t lacked the sizzle of newly-rich entrepreneurs and venture capitalist king-makers — but what it lacked in glitter it made up for in world-changing potential.” Rogers wrote.

Much of the technology behind this next generation of the web is really about a cultural shift than it is about a new coding language, gadget, or widget. Instead, “social web” is a term used to encapsulate a growing set of web-based or web-enabled tools and a reemerging philosophy (or is it instinct?) on how to use them, just as new uses of buildings and ways of being in community are rarely about building code or the latest in construction technology. The design and architecture of community are not that different online and off both should still be about the relationships – of form and function, of people to one another and to self. However, the physics of online space are different and this does have implications.

## **What the tools do**

- Close the gap between intention and action
- Lower the cost of aggregating information
- Lower the cost of having a voice
- Make group communication possible
- Reduce geographic boundaries
- Amplify the voice of a group
- Make networks visible to themselves
- Enable the nature of action
- Lessens the impact of failure

## **As a result**

- There are more “happy accidents”
- The web and informal networks are becoming self-organizing, self-governing affiliates
- Collective action is strengthened
- Those traditionally in power (governments, corporations, foundations, organizations) are forced to listen and participate

## **To prepare**

- We have to learn to be listening organizations that are transparent and open and have permeable boundaries and that are truly in service of our constituents and our mission; rather than prioritizing being in service to our individual organizations and our funders, which can mean competing.
- We have to help people have access to and be literate with the tools.
- We have to understand what to do with the bad uses of the tools.

All this is not to say that organizations are going to disappear altogether or that corporations are all going to fold or even that individuals are no longer important.

This is to say that those still around will no longer be able to dictate with impunity. The people are back and amplified, accountability is no longer just to “the man.”

## **Questions**

- How do we bring mission sustainability and organizational sustainability into balance?
- What does it mean to lead in a social media environment?
- What lessons can we take from informal movements or movements not led and controlled by a particular organization?

- What are the implications for philanthropic efforts to support change when change is happening outside of organizations?

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