

Putnam Barber: Since 1994, I've been the editor of the Internet Nonprofit Center, which is a website devoted to helping other nonprofits understand the complexities of working as nonprofits and helping people who are observers of the nonprofit sector get a better glimpse of what nonprofits are and do.

That's put me in a position to have a great deal of confidence that the future connection between nonprofits and the information and communications technologies that we've been talking about for the past couple of days is going to grow more and more close, more and more powerful, and more and more important to nonprofit organizations in the future.

I just don't believe that there's any possibility that the revolution that's under way now is going to be reversed.

What we've heard a lot about over the last couple of days are services that deliver dramatic new opportunities and efficiencies to nonprofit organizations. The kinds of things that we've heard about in the last 40 minutes or so are good examples of that sort of thing. It's very important for nonprofits to learn how they work, and to make good choices among these services, and to begin to build the economies and efficiencies that this kind of Internet application can provide for them into their plans for the future.

This is a genuine revolution in the way we accomplish public benefit work, and it is very important that we learn to ride that revolution to a positive future. We've also heard, both in the last few minutes and over that last couple of days, about the pitfalls and limits there are in doing work in these ways. The cautionary advice is something that we need to take closely to heart.

There is no one aspect of this revolution that encompasses more than efficiencies and opportunities for individual nonprofits. A good place to end is a challenge to both nonprofit organizations and researchers to think a little bit about this at a slightly wider scale.

Let me start by telling you a story about a local nonprofit in the Seattle area that I've watched over the past five or six years transform itself in a very important way. Any of you who know people who have cerebral palsy know how very difficult it is for them to accomplish the routines of everyday life in particular, and often very painfully, the routines of ordinary communication.

United Cerebral Palsy, which serves King County and *S County, has a long history of making the difficulties of living with cerebral palsy much easier for the people who have to live with that disease.

Four years ago, they started thinking about how they could adopt new communications technologies to serve people who have been their beneficiaries for generations. As they examined that possibility, they decided something which I think was a very important strategic path to follow. They decided to adopt the standard communication technologies of the Internet to this particular problem. Instead of designing something that would perhaps be more immediately responsive to the conditions of the people they were used to working with, they looked at using TCP-IP transmission, and web browsers, and email as the foundation of the new service they were going to provide.

They developed a private intranet service for their beneficiaries. This service allowed the people they worked with to schedule appointments with their therapists, to request a ride from Dial-a-Ride, to communicate with each other, to set up recreational opportunities and social events, and do other things that were a routine part of the service of United Cerebral Palsy, but allowed them to do it from their homes using keyboards at the pace that they were comfortable working, and without having to confront the extraordinary difficulties of communication, which are often part of that disease.

The staff at United Cerebral Palsy found their jobs transformed by this innovation. Instead of the difficult communications problems dominating what they were able to do with their clients during the workday, they were now able focus on delivering effective services much more closely. They found themselves, simply, to be liberated by the change. And they were, of course, very pleased by that.

They were even more pleased by something they didn't expect at all, which is that the people who they serve are now in touch with a wider world in a way that is much more like the way that the rest of us communicate with a wider world. They can send email to their families. They can indulge in their hobbies and interests and passions by surfing the worldwide web. And they have a way of connecting with the world at large which was simply unavailable to them, no matter what UCP might have done to help them before they installed this innovation.

The point of the story, of course, is that by using the standard tools of the Internet, the UCP people were able to seize on what we might as well call a "network effect," and multiply dramatically the benefits of the innovation that they made in the way they delivered their services.

Another example of this kind of change is the one that is sweeping across the space where volunteers match themselves up with service opportunities. There is simply no comparison between the kind of many-to-many relationship, which Jay's ImpactOnline organization is able to create for potential volunteers and organizations that want to engage volunteers in their work. There's simply no comparison between that and the narrow, focused and difficult process which used to be the norm in volunteer recruiting and placement.

It's not just more efficient. It's substantially more satisfying, substantially more rewarding both for the agencies that bring in the volunteers and for the people who are doing the volunteer work. I'm sure Jay could tell us story after story that would document that observation as a result of opening up the channels of communication between potential volunteers and the agencies that they work with.

These two examples suggest to me a challenge both for nonprofit organizations and for those of us who do research in the nonprofit sector. For the nonprofit organizations, the challenge is that it's difficult to do the kind of analysis which led to UCP's decision, which led to the creation of ImpactOnline, and which is slowly creeping through organization after organization throughout the nonprofit sector.

Thinking through where the information block points are in the work that you do, and finding readily accessible, easily adaptable technologies to address those block points and open up the channels of communications so that you can meet your core responsibilities more efficiently and effectively is not easy.

It's difficult to find the money to support doing that. We've heard numerous accounts of that in these last couple of days, and anyone who works with nonprofit organizations has heard more of those stories than, I'm sure, they want to hear.

Lastly, although as the staff at UCP would tell you, the transformation of their work was very welcome, it was also difficult. They had to redefine many of the jobs they did. They had to reorganize the way they structured the organization. They had to change the assignments of people whose daily routine had been dominated by dealing with communications difficulties into other sorts of work. Predictably, not everybody who worked there was entirely happy with those changes, and there were rough spots along the way in the work.

For researchers, these challenges may be in a sense even more difficult. It's very difficult to design the studies; it's hard to know exactly what you're looking for. The same point that we heard this morning about how it's hard to look forward even two years, much less ten, in the way the nonprofit world works, or in the way any kind of organization is working these days, suggests that it's very difficult to design a research plan which will enable you to isolate the essential features of the transformation that you're trying to observe.

It's very difficult to collect the data. People often can't remember in just a few months how they used to do their work, and they certainly are unable, often, to tell you how they're going to be doing their work in just a few months in the futures.

And it's difficult to interpret the results. In a sense, these are classic counterfactual situations where you're trying to compare what might have been with what is, and again, what is with what might have been in still another sense of that term.

Paradoxically, this difficulty for researchers is coming about at the same time that we're seeing a deluge of newly accessible information about the nonprofit sector. The development of the database of 990s, which GuideStar has online now, makes accessible to researchers a level of detail and a quality of information about nonprofits that is simply unprecedented. It is even more striking that anyone who requests it can get that same information in digitized form from the National Center of Charitable Statistics on CD-ROMs.

So, at the same time that we have a whole set of new questions we need to be looking at in trying to understand the changes and developments in the nonprofit sector, we have what is an almost overwhelming deluge of new information that can help us, perhaps, in the work.

The data, though, are frustrating. They tell us a great deal about what the IRS needs to know in order to administer the tax laws, and nowhere near enough about what we want to know as researchers and observers of the nonprofit sector about what it is that makes these organizations so important to the lives of their communities.

In that regard, I think both nonprofit organizations and researchers have tasks ahead that are important if we're going to come to be better able to understand the future of the nonprofit sector. Nonprofit organizations need to help NCCS and others develop better tools for classifying and interpreting the data that they have. The effort to develop the nonprofit-program classification system that the National Center for Charitable Statistics

is engaged in at the moment needs all of our help to make sure that it will encompass the range and variety of the things that nonprofits do.

At the same time, more nonprofits need to take advantage of the opportunity GuideStar offers to provide more detail and appropriate information about their organizations and their purposes than can be found simply in the 990s. That facility is there, and it is, perhaps, fair to describe it as disappointing that so few organizations have taken advantage of it.

New ways of classifying and presenting the data provide network effects of their own as we come to be more skillful at describing and interpreting what nonprofit organizations do because we can take advantage of these new resources of data and new resources of communication that are available to us. Researchers and observers of the nonprofit sector will be able to do a better job of communicating to the wider public what it is that makes the nonprofit sector in America so important and why it is that each of us individually, and all of us collectively, need to do a better job of supporting it.

With that kind of development I see securely in our future, I'm confident that nonprofits are going to be able to ride this revolution to being able to serve more people better, which is, after all, the point.

Ramrayka: You talked about nonprofits' use of the Internet delivering core services. What do you think of the idea of trading intimacy with efficiency? Do you think it's a problem for nonprofits trying to use the net to deliver their core services?

Barber: I don't think it's that simple a trade, Lisa. There are people around the world that I've never seen face to face, never heard their voices, who I feel intimate with. And there are other people who come and stand on my front porch and ask me for money for their kid's school, who I would be happy to trade something with.

I'm one of the skeptics to the notion that the Internet is going to be a tool for nonprofits to raise lots of money from strangers, or engage with strangers in other ways. I think that what we'll see is that it's a new way for people to relate to organizations that they already know and care about. In that sense it's a new form of intimacy, not a trading of something impersonal and efficient for something friendly and close.