

Larry Kirkman: Thank you. Eric, who I hope many of you know is our great historian of broadcasting, of television and radio, has warned us over the years that the introduction of every new technology has brought with it the most extravagant claims for what it would do for education, culture and democracy – promises that have been recurrently undermined by commercial interests.

Over the last 30 years, I myself have worked in what is now known as “the old media,” video, cable and public television, and struggled to create and promote programming that is solutions-oriented, linked to action, invites interaction, and builds the capacity of social networks to solve community problems.

Is the Internet more hospitable to such experiments in democracy? In my own career, I think so. What was inert and analog comes to life in digital. Consider this premise. The knowledge and networks of nonprofit organization are more valuable in this new digital environment in a way that they never were in the analog, with its narrow formats and scarcity of channels.

I suggest that to you is a testable proposition. It has motivated our work at the Benton Foundation. We believe that the trust, the reach of civil society organizations, their information and analysis, their calls to action, and the voices they represent are assets that can be realized in numerous ways in communications for social change.

But as you’ve talked about, this new medium requires that nonprofits rethink and refashion their communications and information – for advocacy, for public education, for soliciting support, and for recruiting volunteers. It’s important that INDEPENDENT SECTOR has chosen to focus on new technologies. It’s critical to get them out of the back room and define them as leadership and CEO concerns.

We used to say that an organization didn’t exist if it wasn’t on television. That rings even more true for the Internet. Andrew Grow, founder of Intel, has said that all businesses are now Internet businesses. Nonprofit leaders are now faced with truth that all of their organizations are Internet organizations. How will they reorient staff and budgets, reinvent publications and other membership communications, and refashion annual conventions?

This new medium brings a new value to the knowledge and networks of nonprofits. It brings new potential for partnerships, for collaboration. It breaks down hierarchies and organizations and invites a qualitatively different relationship to members and donors.

In focus groups, usability studies and online evaluations, we have discovered that there is a tremendous appreciation for nonprofit information – it provides context and orientation, and is perceived as a trusted source. For example, users of Benton’s Connect for Kids website, which now number more than one million unique users each month, feel inspired and empowered by the world of information on child-service advocacy. They are surprised that they can know more and do more than they thought. They appreciate the range and depth of the information, and migrate through it from volunteering to voting, from the personal to the political. They may come into Connect for Kids for very narrow purposes – volunteering to be a mentor and learning what the context is for mentoring, wanting to find childcare for personal reasons, learning what it means to struggle for a family-friendly workplace.

The value of trust in the Internet is enormous, and nonprofits can build on the trust they have earned with their constituencies. I think nonprofits are in many ways positioned to inherit the standards abdicated by what is increasingly a tabloid journalism, and which is increasingly inhibited by a concentration of ownership.

So I think the standards of journalism are up for grabs, and it's a question in our society who can rise to apply them in ways that will be meaningful.

We live in a world of information overload. Search engines are overwhelming and indiscriminate. The commercial portals, the mass-media portals, are bland – really television by another name. We believe there is an appetite for trusted intermediaries that map, digest and layer information and enable discussion and debate.

We've seen this appetite develop around the world in the centers of Oneworld.org. We've seen that Internet users have come to trust the web as a source of information. For example, 44 percent of respondents to a Pew questionnaire indicated that they believe the Internet provides a more accurate view of the world than daily newspapers or newscasts. Those who receive some of their news from the Internet told the Pew surveyors that they went online for three reasons: they could find information that was unavailable elsewhere, they could search for particular subjects, and it was convenient.

But this potential trust that users have placed in Internet information is quite fragile. If it is to be fulfilled, Internet producers must appreciate that Internet users value high-quality content – content that is clear, well written and easy to find – on specialized topics that matter to them.

So it requires, in fact, that nonprofit organizations think about themselves as information providers in quite a new way. Now even commercial media appear with these web trends. The executive editor of Cox Interactive Media said, “We're not gatekeepers anymore. The city walls are down. We don't own customers; we don't control information. They need us as guides. They need to know what's important, what's true, and what's useful. Our new role is as a trusted guide.”

You hear this throughout the commercial sector. But can they deliver on it? For years, the problem of public-interest communications as we've defined it at the Benton Foundation and through the public-interest world, has been access to channels. Now, as many have argued, the problem has to be redefined as gaining the attention of users who are overwhelmed and underserved by the commercial services and by the sheer volume of content.

Websites now reportedly number more than one billion and growing. As Andrew \*Blau has said, “It's not about access to networks, but about access to audiences.”

So how do we carve out a public space on the Internet? We believe that it requires intermediary sites that aggregate nonprofit knowledge. Oneworld.net is an example of such a trusted intermediary site.

Oneworld was started six years ago with the mission to support and give voice to the struggles of the poor to better their lives. Oneworld.net aggregates and annotates more than 850 civil-society organization websites, from the big ones like the Red Cross, CARE and Save the Children, to hundreds of smaller organizations and networks.

It links the consumer to resources for information and action on global issues, on human rights, on sustainable development; and provides dynamic and timely content in more than 80 topics, from agriculture to youth. In addition to the automated functions of spidering these 850 websites, indexing them in the most sophisticated ways, and automatically summarizing them, it also uses this enormous database of resources to create editorial content.

Out of nine centers already that have developed around the world, they’re creating daily news pages and thematic guides, presenting radio and video programs, and providing a forum for dialogue across borders of geography, issues and language with members that range from the World Bank to the group on the frontlines of fighting the Narmada River dam in India.

When Oneworld got started in 1995, its motto was, “The Good Guys Gang Up.” It created the first websites for UNICEF and Oxfam, for Save the Children UK. And it was that spirit of “united we stand, divided we fall,” you can’t be left out, that has to drive the development of Oneworld and other nonprofit portals.

Delivering complex, systemic information on global issues in a manner that is easy to locate, understand and use is difficult under the prevailing commercial Internet models. Recent surveys have shown that the commercial search engines like Alta Vista and others only index less than 20 percent of what’s on the web, leaving a majority of nonprofit site pages unfound and unvisited.

What’s happening with the web is that it’s developing into a multimedia service. And the opportunities for nonprofits in using multimedia are enormously powerful, not only to reach audiences here in the U.S. which increasingly have access to broadband and to the developed world, but also to use multimedia as a way to reach people in the last mile, in the developing world. Oneworld in Africa and the Balkans is distributing radio programs through the Internet that are then used in community radio stations.

So our consumers here in the U.S. and around the world are facing lavish promises – competing technologies, a welter of consumer services from cable video on demand to Internet-based streaming media. And in this environment, the nonprofit sector has to assert a vision of public media. The future for nonprofits on the Internet lies in the distinction between the commercial marketplace and public space – the difference between selling a product and serving a nation. It is a distinction we have to honor and embrace.

Tuckman: We had agreed to follow the format of one question in between each speaker, then we will have a panel discussion, and then we will open it up to the audience. So in that spirit, Larry, let me ask you this question. I know that our next speaker is going to talk about social relationships across distances, among other things, so let me ask you this. Your organization has 850 members in it right now?

Kirkman: There are 850 partner websites. Many of them represent literally hundreds, and some thousands, of NGOs in their regions. There are, as we know, 600,000 nonprofits in the U.S., and the question of how we aggregate the content and annotate it is a real challenge. What this does is bring together those organizations that are working in some way on human rights and sustainable development. As I said, from large organizations like the UN agencies, multilaterals, to the small groups that are on the ground.

Tuckman: So if somebody is sitting in the audience and has an interest in affiliating with a network, either yours or one like it, is it difficult for them to do?

Kirkman: No, I think Oneworld makes it very easy for organizations to become part of the database because the work is done by tools that have been developed over the last six years that don't require any additional effort on the part of the organization that's spidered, indexed; whose work is automatically summarized. But the opportunity to be part of a community of practice that is inventing applications and use of the Internet is one of the other major features.

We did a study of 150 NGOs in the U.S. as part of our feasibility and development of Oneworld US, and what many of them said was they wanted to find alternative and effective means to reach the public. That was one of their most important concerns and efforts. But in addition, they said that there were two features that Oneworld provides that were not currently available elsewhere. One is to provide a forum for sharing research and analysis; to learn from one another's experiences. And the second was to highlight substantive program work – this ephemeral, fugitive material, program reports, gray matter – to balance the inevitable emphasis on resource development and fundraising that the Internet focused on.

So this community of practice, community of learners; the ability to share research and experience; in one that's quite critical and, I think, different than what you see on commercial websites.

Tuckman: So in the spirit of what we've called “the vibrant space,” what you see as the vibrancy here is the partnership with other organizations.

Kirkman: Yes, it is a network of organizations. And it's a human network as well as a search engine, and a spidering, and a technology service. That's an important mix to have.

Tuckman: Good. We'll come back to that.