
Power to the Edges: Trends and Opportunities in Online Civic Engagement

Executive Summary

Power to the Edges: Trends in Online Civic Engagement, commissioned by **PACE-Philanthropy for Active Citizen Engagement** (www.pacefunders.org) and published by **PACE** and **The E-Volve Foundation**, provides an overview of the state of online civic engagement—what it is, where it is headed, and what it means for engagement efforts and those who support them. The preparation of this report included a review of relevant literature, monitoring of current online discussions on related topics, and in-depth interviews with leaders in the fields of online technologies, nonprofit capacity building, citizen engagement and social networks. This study is no ultimate guide, but a snapshot in time that serves as a jumping off point for further discussions about how these tools and the culture of online civic engagement can be further developed and scaled for broader, deeper and more lasting citizen action. Readers are invited to read the full report and participate in this ongoing dialogue at www.evolvefoundation.org.

The age of connectivity is changing the landscape of commerce, manufacturing and society, restructuring the way individuals, companies and nonprofits interact with each other and with their communities:

- Large numbers of people can be mobilized within hours—even minutes—to donate, volunteer, protest, call Congress, boycott—all at little or no cost.
- Individuals are by-passing the work of established parties and organizations with their self-generated campaigns.
- Individuals, groups and organizations are generating their own news without the benefit of mainstream media.

Traditional ways of doing business are coming to an end. For those concerned with building an active citizenry, these changes need to be understood and harnessed.

The December 2004 tsunami that hit the communities encircling the Indian Ocean may well be remembered not only for the size of the tragedy, but for the way the entire continuum of Internet and other communications tools were used in response: blogs coordinated help and communicated news; online contributions were raised in unprecedented amounts; cell phones and text messaging allowed citizen journalists to provide moment-by-moment reporting.

Three parallel tracks of Internet usage—nonprofit, commercial and individual—inform the future direction of civic engagement.

- 1) To date, nonprofit use has focused primarily on supporting or improving *existing* organizational practices (online brochures, email action alerts, “donate now” links), with a small number of organizations beginning to change how they think about and implement the Internet to engage their constituents.
- 2) In the commercial sector, Internet use has evolved from supporting traditional business practices to the creation of entirely new business models (just-in-time inventory, engaging the customer as product/service designer).
- 3) Individuals are increasingly connected, doing so at high speeds, and deriving satisfaction and a sense of community from their time online, reading their news online, joining online support groups, communicating with policymakers.

The convergence of these separate tracks was particularly evident during the 2003-2004 U.S. presidential campaign season, during which time we saw significant changes both in how organizations engage citizens and

how citizens themselves engage in public policy. Online organizing can reach more people with greater frequency and gives people the opportunity to shape their engagement in real and meaningful ways.

While the tools for online engagement may be changing at lightning speed, the outcomes of online engagement do not differ significantly from those of more traditional efforts: individuals donate money and time to worthy causes, people register to vote and show up at the polls, policymakers listen and legislation is passed. Online engagement does not preclude, exclude or even dilute the need for “on land” (or offline) engagement. *The key to understanding online civic engagement is not to focus on the latest tool or the latest tactic, but to recognize that engaging people and organizations in this new environment requires new ways of thinking and new organizational models.*

Four aspects of civic engagement in particular have been most affected by recent online developments:

- While civic engagement campaigns have traditionally been designed, initiated and carried out by *organizations*, today, loose *networks of individuals* can accomplish campaign objectives and deliver intense bursts of power either in partnership with or completely independent of organizations.
- The traditional model of “broadcast” communications for civic engagement is being replaced—or at least augmented—by narrowcasting and citizen-as-newsmaker, which can that both broaden and deepen a campaign’s reach.
- The Internet allows for a level of field operation management never possible before, with online tools to coordinate phone banking and neighborhood canvassing, to mobilize local citizens, to assess campaign impact.
- The traditional “rule of thirds” that has dominated campaign fundraising has been flipped on its head due to the increasing willingness of individuals to make online transactions plus the significantly lower transaction costs of online giving.

The increasingly connected nature of society and the increased pace for social engagement are overwhelming traditional models for planning, funding and channeling public interest. New models require a different set of benchmarks, skills and training—changes that have very little to do with technology or the Internet and everything to do with building entirely new organizational cultures. Specifically, four areas of institutional-based civic engagement demand attention:

- 1) Design a *connectivity* culture that integrates technology and Internet communications with the sociology of engaging human beings.
- 2) Be nimble and quick to respond to current news and events, tying organizational issues to the often fleeting passion of the public.
- 3) Push power to the edges, actively encouraging and supporting citizens to help design and carry out their own organizing, and taking what they learn and improving the campaign with their suggestions.
- 4) Build *network-centric* leadership that establishes and supports “connectors,” invests in social capital, and develops new mechanisms for feedback and evaluation.

We are at a turning point in how Americans participate in civic discourse, where the barriers to full participation are lowered and the potential for powerful participation increased. While the last many years have focused on training individuals and building organizational capacity in specific areas, now is the time to “wire” these investments together while supporting new training, leadership and planning skills. The future of civic engagement belongs to communities and organizations that effectively align online and offline policy, strategy and campaign efforts with the passion and power of individuals.

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For More Information

***PACE* Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement**

Jill Blair, Executive Director
jblair@informingchange.com
www.pacefunders.org
Telephone 510-665-6130

The E-Volve Foundation

Allison Fine, CEO
allison@evolvefoundation.org
www.evolvefoundation.org
Telephone 914-674-9568