

SECTION 4

networking

This piece will introduce you to the world of internet “blogs”, and suggest ways to use this no-cost tool to share information, learn about other initiatives and get the word to a broad audience out about your activities.

A Blogging as a tool for activism

Blogs and Blogging

Blogs are a relatively new, but very important, medium for personal and organizational information dissemination. Many individuals have blogs, and they range in content from the very personal (experiences in the lives of the authors) to political and philosophical. Many people write blogs that are specific to content areas, as well as more broad progressive politics. It is a good idea to get to know the blogs that will cover an area of interest, so that you can send press releases to bloggers. It is good to make personal contact with them, so that they will be more likely to cover your activities.

Organizational or community blogs are also increasing in number and popularity. You can find a number of poverty-related blogs on PovNet's website at <http://www.povnet.org/> (check the column on the right of the web site).

Reading, and keeping track of blogs that are in your particular areas of interest and activism can be important. It's important for sharing of information, learning more about topics, and getting the word out on what you are doing.

Tags

Tags are usually single (or a couple) of words that characterize the content of a blog post. For instance, a post that is about a particular effort to create a housing project in Toronto might include the tags "housing" and "toronto". Tagging creates what are called "folksonomies" – user-driven (or community-driven) ways of organizing information (see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folksonomy> for more information.) This makes it easier to find blog posts by topic areas you might be interested in. Most posts that are tagged have 3 to 5 tags that help to situate that post in a context. However, tagging is not universal; many bloggers do not tag their posts.

Tagging allows for a number of very powerful features. It makes it easier to find blogs and blog entries if they are tagged. Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com/>), for instance, allows you to search just by tag. Technorati keeps track of blogs in terms of how often they are updated. You can also create RSS feeds (see info on RSS tags below) that are tag specific – so if you wanted to keep track of all of the blog posts that are tagged "housing" and "toronto" you could do that. For example, on Technorati, you can search for "housing toronto" in the tags of blogs, then you can subscribe to that RSS feed (see below) and track all posts with those tags over time.

Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>) and YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com>) use tagging extensively, because the media shared (photographs and videos, respectively) do not have words that make them easily searchable. For instance, you could search Flickr for photos with the tags "manitoba" and "city" if you were interested in urban issues in Manitoba.

RSS Feeds

A very easy way to keep track of many blogs, instead of having to bookmark them all and visit them one by one and see if they have anything new, is to use a feed reader, or RSS reader. There are many, both online, and offline.

Google has a good online reader (<http://www.google.com/reader/>).

Netvibes is also quite good (<http://www.netvibes.com/>).

Bloglines is another popular online reader (<http://www.bloglines.com/>). If you'd rather read your feeds offline, there are many feed readers for Windows, Mac and Linux available (a short list is available at: <http://blogspace.com/rss/readers>)

Subscribing to a feed is easy. Most feed readers will “autodiscover” a feed if you just put in the URL of the blog itself in the place to subscribe to a feed. Also, many sites now have this small icon:



If you right-click (or control-click for Macintosh) this icon on a blog, and “copy link location” and then, in the place to subscribe in your feed reader, paste, that will subscribe you to that feed. Then, your reader will indicate whether or not a blog has new entries, how many, and which ones are new.

Starting to Blog

In order to use a blog for getting the word out about activism and advocacy efforts, a good start is to open an account at one of the community blogs, which allow members to start their own blog. In addition starting a blog at one of the free blogging sites listed below is an option. That will provide you with more features and control than blogging at a community site. Of course, getting the word out to others about your blog is an important thing, especially if you start a blog on your own. It is definitely not one of those “if you build it they will come” sorts of things, it needs work and effort to get people to read a blog. Many blogs remain in obscurity without some kind of publicity. In addition, consistent posting (not necessarily daily, but on some schedule) is important.

Free blogging tools include:

<http://www.blogger.com/>

<http://wordpress.com/>

<http://www.xanga.com/>

If you already have a website, and you feel that blogging will become an important part of your activities, it is worth investigating a more robust blogging platform, either on your own server (such as using Wordpress, Drupal, Joomla, or other server CMS tools), or a paid

service such as TypePad (<http://www.typepad.com/>) These will allow you, for example, to have your own domain, and are much more feature-rich (for instance, having multiple blogs and bloggers, very customized templates, etc.)

In order to get the word out about your blog, besides putting a link on your website (if you have one), put the link on your email and discussion board signature, and on any printed materials that you give out. There are a few free online tools that are useful for getting the word out, as well.

People can also find your blog by using tags that characterize the content of each post. If you “claim” your blog in Technorati (an easy process) and if you include those tags in each post, Technorati knows when you’ve updated your blog so that people can find the posts by searching for the tags that you might have used on your post. Many blogging platforms have a field for so that it is done for you automatically. But if your blog tool doesn’t have that as a feature, it’s easy to add a tag. If you know you want to add the tag “poverty” and “yukon” to a post, go into the HTML editing portion of your blogging tool, and enter the following at the end of the post:

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Technorati tags: <a href="http://www.technorati.com/tag/poverty" rel="tag">poverty</a>, <a href="http://www.technorati.com/tag/ontario" rel="tag">yukon</a>
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Google can also search blogs, and has what they call their “ping service” which is basically the same as Technorati’s claiming service, but it’s a lot easier – just put in the URL, and Google will index the blog (<http://blogsearch.google.com/ping>)

Another part of getting the word out about your blog is making sure that people can read your RSS feed. Feedburner (<http://www.feedburner.com/>) allows you to keep track of how many people read your feed (at this point, for example, 60% of the regular readers of my blog read it from the RSS feed.)

Blog Feedback

Blogs have two feedback mechanisms -- ways for you to comment on other blogs, and for people to comment on your blog. The first is commenting. Most blogs allow comments. The comments will most often include your name, and a link to your email, blog or website. This is a good way to give your opinion about a post, as well as provide links to your own site.

The second kind of feedback mechanism is trackback. This is much less common. It allows you, in writing your own post, to “trackback” to a blog post you are referring to. This will result in an entry on that blog to your post. It requires you to copy the “trackback URL” that is on the post you are referring to, into a field in your blog entry (if it exists in your blogging tool.)

Commenting and trackback are critical parts of what is called the “blogosphere.” People providing feedback of all sorts is what makes the blogosphere so dynamic and interesting

– a conversation can get started on one blog, and spread widely, and sometimes, end up being covered by the mainstream media (this is happening more and more frequently.) And they can be very key features in an effort to publicize and disseminate information about your activities.

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