

SECTION FOUR

PLUGGING PEOPLE IN

NEW MEDIA TACTICS TO ENHANCE COLLABORATION AND PARTICIPATION

NO LONGER AN ADD-ON, online strategies can be front and center in your campaign. By harnessing the power of Web 2.0—the range of interactive tools that enable participation on the Internet—you can work smarter, collaborate more easily with allies and reach new supporters. And with Web 2.0 tools, you can create your own media, broadcasting the message you want your audience to receive.

On the following pages, you'll find a primer on new media tools, with information on how media activists can use everything from blogs to YouTube, podcasts to wikis. You'll also find case studies of groundbreaking Web-based campaigns.

Lastly, because it's an unfortunate truth that with new opportunities for expression come new threats to that expression, this section also highlights campaigns to ensure that the tremendous organizing potential of the Internet is protected and its benefits shared broadly.

THE TOOLS THEY USE: ONLINE AND OFFLINE COLLABORATION FOR MEDIA ACTIVISTS

By Dharma Dailey

THE EASIER it is to collaborate, the more collaboration will happen, right? Here we'll look at how one all-volunteer group used a variety of online and offline collaborative tools to pull together a very successful event. Then we'll look at some collaborative tools that are being used by another activist group that has a small staff and lots of volunteers.

Northeast Citizens for Responsible Media (ReMedia, for short) is an all-volunteer group active on media reform in the Hudson Valley of New York. When ReMedia got the news that the FCC was coming to town, they had only three short weeks to alert the community, find an event space, get local officials and experts lined up to testify and create a press campaign for pre- and post-event press coverage. Because ReMedia is all volunteer, they were constrained by having no money and no staff.

It Started with a Meeting. Right after the FCC called to say it had selected a date to come to the Hudson Valley, ReMedia members held a meeting. About eight people attended and set out to create an overall plan of action. The meeting was a long one, but it set the project up for success. Important strategic questions were talked through: What key groups must be represented at this hearing? What are the best ways to ensure that they are represented? What's different about media ownership here than other places, and how can we demonstrate that?

After coming to consensus on the big picture questions, people were ready to think about how the work should be broken down over the following weeks. Working groups included Press Outreach; Event Space; Outreach to Underrepresented/Marginalized Groups; Outreach to Local Officials and Pooh-bahs; and Outreach to Local Media Experts, such as professors. The meeting included working out a pre-event and post-event press strategy.

Yes, meetings are still an activist's best friend. There are a plethora of online tools that can help you manage information and stay on top of tasks, but nothing works better than a meet-

ing for strategic planning, evaluation or ironing out differences of opinion. Meeting face to face builds trust, and it also translates into a stronger feeling of connection when working together online. Rob Purdie, a longtime environmental activist and professional project manager, notes that just prior to and just after a meeting there is a burst of energy and activity. That's just what you need to kick off your project, as well as move it from one phase to another.

First Email Blast, First Press Outreach and Personalized Emails. The night of the meeting, the Press Outreach group drafted an announcement to blast to the ReMedia email list. This announcement doubled as a press release. Everyone in the group was encouraged to forward the email and tailor the message to each of their selected outreach groups.

The trick to using email for outreach is to always put the most important information first, starting with the subject line. A subject line like "Hudson Valley FCC Hearing Nov. 7th" lets people know that the message is time sensitive.

Follow Up with Phone Calls. ReMedia already had a history of good turnout for their events, but they wanted to make sure that the FCC hearing truly reflected the concerns of a wide spectrum of local residents. That meant using methods that would help quickly establish relationships with groups that they had never connected with before. The best way to do this quickly was to pick up the phone.

ReMedia used follow-up phone calls after the initial email announcement to connect with community leaders. Volunteers with relationships at local media outlets forwarded the email, and then made follow-up calls to ensure coverage of the event.

Expand the Circle of Allies Digitally with Conference Calls, Video Chat and Plain Old Chat. ReMedia wanted to get advice from other groups that had held FCC hearings, so they arranged conference calls with a few allies out of the area.

Cross the digital divide: Nothing beats a face-to-face meeting for planning, building trust and ironing out differences of opinion.



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Youth plug in: Oregon Learning Lab for Information Education (OLLIE) van.

When it isn't possible to get all of your collaborators in the same room, many activists turn to conference calls and video chat. Conference calls can be arranged through conference call services or through Internet-based programs like Skype, which works on any computer for text, video or audio chats.

Video chat can also help expand opportunities for collaboration. For example, a youth media project can arrange to have their youth talk directly to peers working in other communities.

Video chat has an advantage over conference calls because seeing someone adds more depth to the communication experience. Also, people are less tempted to "multitask" (which is just another way of saying "not paying attention").

A simple text chat program is another tool that can keep remote collaboration running smoothly. I work with a group that represents Internet users in Internet governance forums. We have had a single text chat going for over six months using Skype. With just one tool, our group has been able to effectively share information in this informal "back channel" among folks spread out from Hawaii to Moldova.

With a text chat, you can involve as many people as you like, and save chats that are useful. Skype tells you when anyone has added a comment. You can have the same chat active on multiple computers. You can also use Skype to send files or make phone calls to land lines. Other popular chat services include AOL Instant Messenger and Yahoo Messenger. On my Mac, I use a free open source program called Adium to access these other services.

Collaborating on Documents and Messaging. ReMedia had a lot of written material to pull together in a hurry, including email announcements, text for the Web site, messages for particular audiences and press outreach materials. The press kit had all the usual organizational information about ReMedia, but also contained issue briefs that gave substantive information about how media consolidation affects the Hudson Valley, including professional research and expert testimony. The work on these documents was divvied up among a number of volunteers. Some sympathetic local reporters were even recruited to help create the press kit. Collaboration involved a lot of back and forth in email and telephone calls.

When using email for outreach, put the most important information first, and always follow up with a phone call.

Keep in mind that pre-event press helps create the excitement and interest that your project needs to be successful. Post-event press can document that success to future allies, collaborators and funders. By recruiting people with media skills to be part of the project, ReMedia had more credibility to get coverage from media outlets.

The way that ReMedia collaborated on creating the necessary documents worked, and that's what counts. But there are other ways to facilitate this kind of collaboration. Online services that let you edit and store a document in one place that is accessible to all collaborators have several advantages over passing things back and forth in email. You don't have to worry if your text editing program is compatible with your collaborator's. You always know that you are looking at the latest version. It's easy to see what changes have been made by different collaborators. And all documents are always available to everyone with an Internet connection—no chasing down someone to get that precious document at the last minute.

Easy-to-use online project management services like Basecamp (BasecampHQ.com) let you and your collaborators write and edit together on "writeboards." Google Docs is another popular way to collaborate, though many activists are uncomfortable with Google's privacy policies. Services like Basecamp also let you have online calendars, project milestones, to-do lists and document storage. Basecamp will even send people "to-do" reminders. You can set up most of these services so that you receive an email or an RSS announcement when changes are made by your collaborators.

To make chats, teleconferences and email more effective, Marc LaPorte, a coordinator for an all-volunteer open source project, suggests that someone in your group take responsibility to copy and paste any decisions that are made and questions that may come up again into an online archive such as a wiki. Wiki, which means "fast" in Hawaiian, is an online tool that lets people quickly and collaboratively document information. LaPorte also recommends pointing people to a link instead of answering each question directly. "Here is the Web address (URL) that has all the information about the event..." is more helpful than re-posting or re-typing all the info.

Use RSS, Google Alerts, Tags and Bookmarks to Track Information that Affects Your Project. ReMedia carefully scanned all local news outlets, from the time of their first email blast to the days after the FCC hearing, to monitor the coverage of the event. This involved maintaining a comprehensive list of local media outlets. Blogs were less popular at the time (2004), but if the event were today, ReMedia would also be looking at Hudson Valley blogs and blogs about media consolidation.

To make it easier to keep on top of relevant coverage, there are a few stand-out tools that your group should consider. First, you can set up a Google Alert that will email you anytime your group gets mentioned in the mainstream press. You can use blog search engines, such as Technorati, to identify bloggers who may be covering your project, or may want to. You can use RSS feeds to keep on top of important sources of information—such as the Web sites of key allies and stake-holders. And, finally, you can use a tag service such as Del.icio.us to help you bookmark important information sources for later use, as well as to share that info with your collaborators.

For more on these tools, see "Ramping It Up Online," p. 50.

Results. The hard work paid off, with 350–400 Hudson Valley residents coming out to voice their opinions at the FCC hearing. "It made it so much more valid to hear the sentiments coming out of the citizenry," says Joanne Lukacher, a ReMedia volunteer. The event received print, radio and television coverage from both major and smaller outlets in the area. Several small local outlets specifically came because of ReMedia's pre-event outreach, and, says Lukacher, "I thought the local papers covered our event better than the larger outlets."

It Ends with a Meeting. About a week after the FCC hearing, ReMedia got together to celebrate their hard work and also to evaluate the event's impact. It was a good time for writing thank-you letters to people and groups who showed support. Several conversations were started at the hearing about possible new collaborations, and during the initial evaluation meeting, ReMedia found that there were too many threads to follow. All of this needed to be

Your Web 2.0 tools will only work if people use them. Pick a few, experiment, and make sure to train folks on how they work.

sorted out by the group in a next-step strategy meeting. So they scheduled a facilitated day-long meeting about a month after the hearing to help them sort out opportunities.

A week after the end of a project or campaign is about the right amount of time to set up an initial in-person evaluation meeting. Just as it's important to meet in person for strategy, it's also important to do evaluations in person. This kind of review will often lead you back to the beginning—a new round of strategic planning.

Contact Management Software and a Wiki Help a Small Staff and Volunteers Make Big Waves for Big Media. A few other tools worth mentioning are more helpful for bigger projects or ongoing group operations. Prometheus Radio Project was an early adopter of CRM software (Constituent Relationship Management software). With CRM software they are able to keep track of the interests and needs of thousands of media activists around the country: who wants a radio station, who has technical skills that they are willing to donate, allies, engineers, lawyers—you name it. This makes it very easy for Prometheus to turn people-power into a smooth-running campaign action engine. Currently, Prometheus uses an open source CRM called Sugar.

Another tool that helps Prometheus run projects, campaigns and day-to-day operations is their internal wiki, which includes everything from the phone numbers of nearby lunch places to complex technical and legal information for community radio applicants to to-do lists for upcoming events. Corey Mark of Prometheus

explains the advantage of the wiki over traditional ways of storing documents. “The wiki combines narrative language with a place to quickly add or look up important information. If I am just looking at a directory of documents on a file server, I have to open each document to see what it is. With the wiki I can add language that describes what is here and why.”

Final Thoughts. Keep in mind that any “tool” only works if people use it. That means that they have to have access to it and be comfortable with it. A new tool will usually require a bit of training in both “how this can help us accomplish our mission” and “how to use it.”

Also consider that different people in your group may have different preferences for communicating. That has led some groups to use so many collaborative tools that group members can't keep track. Be selective. Pick a few that you think will work best for your group. And remember—the important thing is not what tools you use but that you kick Big Media butt!

For More Information:

For up to date information and unbiased reviews of software and Web 2.0 services that are useful to nonprofits, check out www.IdealWare.org.

For a case study on People's Production House efforts to overcome digital segregation, visit www.spinproject.org/whosemedia.

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