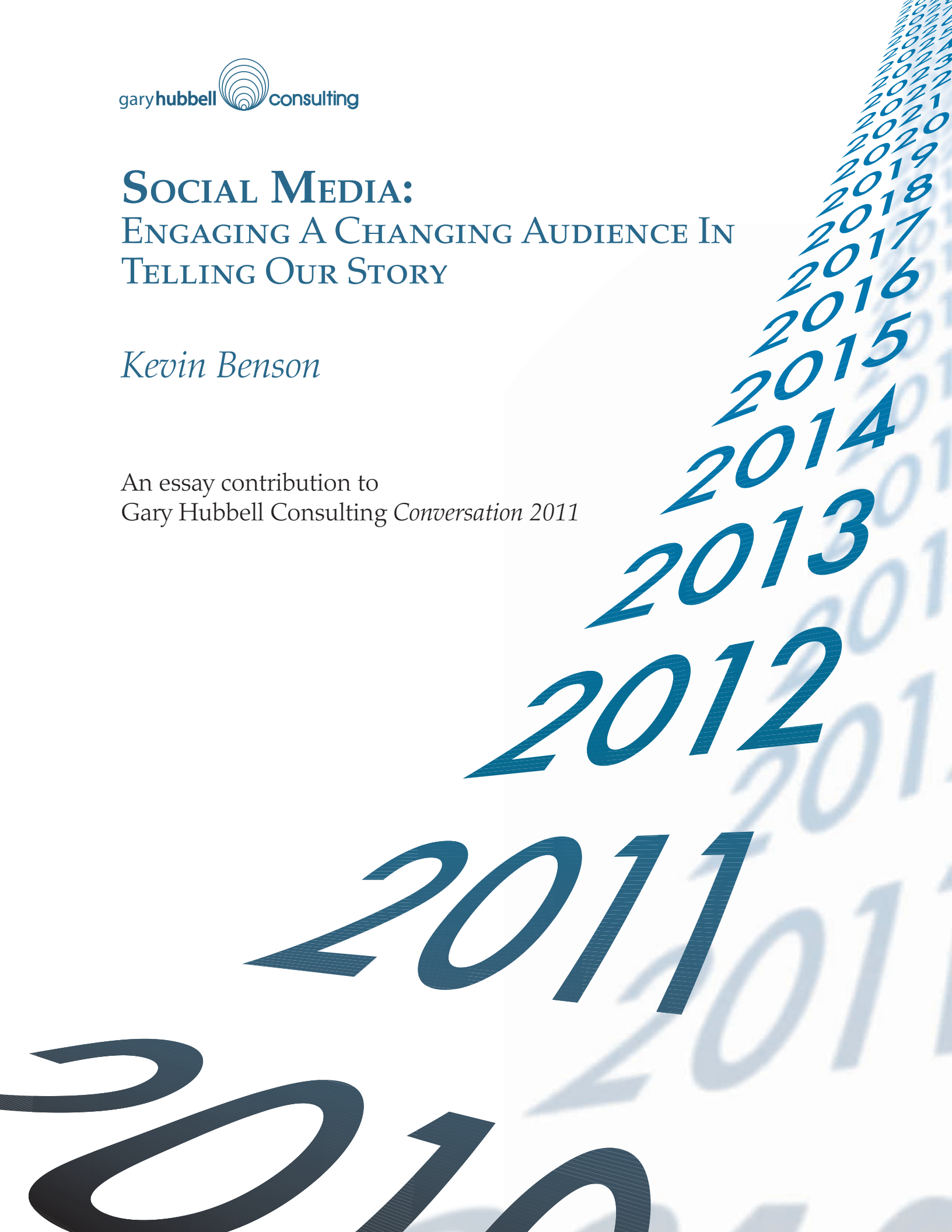


# SOCIAL MEDIA: ENGAGING A CHANGING AUDIENCE IN TELLING OUR STORY

*Kevin Benson*

An essay contribution to  
Gary Hubbell Consulting *Conversation 2011*



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## ABOUT GARY HUBBELL CONSULTING CONVERSATION

Annually, Gary Hubbell Consulting convenes and hosts a small hand-picked group of social sector professionals from throughout North America for three days of intense dialogue and critical thinking. We strive to create a thought-provoking, mind-opening, and stimulating conversation about philanthropy, organizational leadership, and social sector change. This deep exploration of the nature and challenges of the philanthropic environment is intended to engage, inform, and inspire senior leaders to be catalysts for change in their own organizations and communities of influence. With each *GHC Conversation*, we seek to establish the seeds of a continuing and enriching network that nourishes us as individuals and helps each of us change how we converse, inspire, and seek new dimensions of philanthropy.

## Gary Hubbell Consulting *Conversation 2011*



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Kevin Benson currently serves as the Manager of the Providence Center for Faith and Healing, (PCFH) a Ministry of Providence Health Care in Spokane, WA. Kevin is passionate and excited about integrating and advancing spirituality in health care, and likes to find innovative and fun ways to expand the mission of his organization in the 21st century.

He has spent the last 11 years working with non-profits, churches, universities and other mission driven organizations in Spokane, WA He has spent time as a development officer, special events director, volunteer and youth pastor.

Kevin is a graduate of Whitworth University, where he received a B.A. in Communications and Theatre, and Eastern Washington University, where he received a M.S. in Communications.

Kevin is also a dad, a comedian, an actor and a lover of all things "tech." He spends much of his free time with his family, daughters, Ramona (4) and Eloise (2) and his wife, Ann.

This is Kevin's first *GHC Conversation*.

# SOCIAL MEDIA: ENGAGING A CHANGING AUDIENCE IN TELLING OUR STORY

By Kevin Benson

In the summer of 2010, my wife and I attended her 20<sup>th</sup> high school reunion. While the night wasn't anything out of the ordinary – we enjoyed a nice meal, had a drink, shared some laughs with old friends, and danced awkwardly to 80s music – what was most interesting about the evening was what it lacked: small talk. In the last 5 years, the advent of social media (for the purposes of this essay, I am defining social media as the various internet based technologies which allow people to communicate easily to share ideas, information and resources) has fundamentally changed the way that we interact with one another on a personal level. Instead of saying, “Oh hey, Jim! How long has it been? What have you been up to?” we now begin conversations with “So, I saw on Facebook that you and Mary got divorced and you bought a Harley. How’s that going for you?” As we drove home, my wife remarked on how different her 20-year reunion was from her 10<sup>th</sup>, on how in-depth and personal her conversations were this time around. And while she has no plans to interact any more frequently with her long-lost high school friends, she was shocked at how being connected by social media had completely changed the tone of the evening.

Social media is changing the way that we interact with one another in many different ways, personally, professionally, and as a society. When asked to explore the question “What are the interrelationships that will most deeply affect the practice and promise of philanthropy in 2030?”, I immediately began to think about my fascination with technology and social media, how it has affected relationships, and the subsequent impact this shift must have on philanthropy. First, is the recognition that a virtual or online relationship is, in fact, part of the fabric of interpersonal relationships, especially for younger generations. Now, more

than ever before the “millennial” generation is fully engaged with technology in all aspects of their lives, professional and personal. For this reason, non-profits MUST have a vital, vibrant online presence. Secondly, our relationships are changed by the wealth of information available online – not just news, pop culture and sports data, but status updates and personal profiles. When we have access to so much information about so many entities, we can leap-frog over surface issues and get to what is substantial. Given that this is becoming an assumed element in relationships, organizations need to take advantage of the wealth of information available about, and numerous opportunities for, interaction with donors. Thirdly, because social media is so interactive, the bar has been raised for what needs to be offered as an online presence. Donors want to hear a well-presented story, relate with it and have their input heard. Finally, and this is probably the biggest shift, donors want not just to be told a story, but to actually be part of creating the story. Altering our relationship with our donors so that they can take this more dynamic role will be our biggest challenge moving into the future.

In Clay Shirky’s paradigm-shifting book *Cognitive Surplus*, he cites NYU Journalism Professor Jay Rosen and his phrase “The People Formerly Known as the Audience” (Shirky, p. 36). Truly, social media hasn’t just changed relationships, social media has changed *people*. It would be ludicrous to present the same “product” we’ve always presented to an entirely different group of people. If we are to remain in a dialogue with them, **we have to change our product to meet the demands of the People Formerly Known as the Audience.**

## **WE MUST HAVE A DYNAMIC SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE.**

As I mentioned in my opening paragraph, relationships have changed in the wake of social media and technology. And, because of this embrace of technology, relationships have moved online. For many people it is absolutely acceptable, even essential, to have most interactions with friends and loved ones happen with technology, not face to face or even voice to voice. Some would argue that this trend is creating a society that does not value the same level of intimacy or depth of interpersonal relationship, but I would have to disagree. While it may be distressing to some to see people spend hours and hours of their time texting, clicking away on keyboards, or updating their Facebook statuses, it is a fallacy to assume that the use of these tools is indicative of values or depth of relationships. People today are, in fact, more connected than ever before, and constantly aware of and in touch with the importance of interpersonal relationships. They have found a new way, and new tools, to cultivate and manage their face to face interpersonal relationships.

So how then does this extend to philanthropy? Philanthropy has always been good at cultivating relationships with people who are passionate about a cause or an idea. As a core strength to the industry, this is something that should not change. What MUST change, however, is how quickly and how willingly we adapt to the use of these new tools. Pepsi, one of the world's biggest brands, opted out of advertising in the Super Bowl in 2010 and instead poured 1/3 of their total advertising budget into launching a new cause-driven social media initiative called "The Refresh Project." By all accounts, Pepsi's marketing and philanthropy efforts are paying off. According to a USA Today article from Nov 4, 2010, Pepsi was selected in a consumer survey as the number one brand for "placing as much importance on supporting a good cause, as they do on profits" (Cone).

In the same article, Pepsi's communication director reports that Pepsi was on track to have more than 6.5 million people register with The Pepsi Refresh project in 2010, and more than 50 million votes were cast on the Pepsi Refresh website. That amounts to billions of page views and media impressions in a given year. Not to mention bringing attention to thousands of worthy causes across the country.

As American commerce has moved on-line, philanthropy has taken some first steps as well. In 2008, \$15 billion dollars was donated to charities online. This number represents a 44% increase in on-line donations from the previous year. (*Giving USA 2009*) And while this is clearly a drop in the bucket for online commerce (Amazon.com alone made \$24 billion online over the same time period) this is a start, in fact it is a significant step toward shifting our business practices on-line.

In the book "The Networked Non-Profit" by Beth Kanter and Allison Fine, the authors lament the non-profit sector's reluctance to jump in to social media and technology, saying, "Unfortunately, too many nonprofit organizations are losing ground today because they fear what might happen if they open themselves up to this new world" (p. 6). The emerging new wave of donors – the People Formerly Known as the Audience – is online, and they expect non-profits to be there too. While it is understandable that an organization would be afraid to shift their institutional culture to accommodate new technologies and tools, the fact remains that donors want multiple channels to reach us, and we must give them those options. Social media is about relationship building, engaging a community, having conversations and making connections. It is exactly what we in non-profits have been waiting for. If Pepsi, a major corporate player, recognizes the value of a social media presence, how can the non-profit community scoff at it? If we are to move into the future, retaining a relationship with this new audience, we must take social media seriously.

## WE SHOULD TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE UNPRECEDENTED ACCESS WE HAVE TO DONORS

It has been said that social media is the vehicle through which the “democratization of the internet” will take place. Now, more than ever before, personal privacy is no longer assumed, organizations, corporations and non-profits are asking for (and receiving) record amounts of feedback, engagement and ideas from consumers, supporters and interested parties. But are our organizations ready to have a more open or even “social” culture?

So, this begs the question: are we listening? Because if we are going to ask questions, the new audience expects us to listen – and respond! In the summer of 2009, Heather B. Armstrong, a best-selling author and “mommy blogger,” purchased a brand-new Maytag washing machine that immediately broke down. While most people would call customer service, complain and navigate the call center maze to get their appliance repaired, Armstrong had a different idea. As one of the most widely followed bloggers on Twitter, Armstrong decided to fight back, by telling the world how unhappy she was with her purchase. On her blog, and through her twitter account, Armstrong recounted how she had waited over 3 weeks, and had seen 3 different service technicians, and her washer was still broken. She adds stories and anecdotes about difficult customer service personnel and having to wait days to schedule another service appointment. Finally, frustrated and exhausted, Armstrong wrote the following series of tweets:

*So that you may not have to suffer like we have: DO NOT EVER BUY A MAYTAG. I repeat: OUR MAYTAG EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN A NIGHTMARE.* [2:19 PM Aug 26th](#) from [Tweetie](#)

*Have I mentioned what a nightmare our experience was with Maytag? No? A TOTAL NIGHTMARE.* [2:22 PM Aug 26th](#) from [Tweetie](#)

*That brand new washing machine from MAYTAG? That someone has been out to fix three times? STILL BROKEN. DO NOT BUY MAYTAG.* [2:29 PM Aug 26th](#) from [Tweetie](#)

*Oh, also. I have a newborn. So we do, what, three loads of laundry a day? Except, our brand new washing machine IS BROKEN. DO NOT BUY MAYTAG* [2:32 PM Aug 26th](#) from [Tweetie](#)

*RIP: OUR BRAND NEW MAYTAG WASHING MACHINE.* [2:35 PM Aug 26th](#) from [Tweetie](#)

*Remember, that Armstrong is a best-selling author, blogger, and had, at this time, more than 1.1 million followers on twitter. In response to Armstrong's Twitter campaign, Maytag contacted her and replaced her washer promptly.*

The reaction by the public to this event has been fascinating. Many people accuse Armstrong of being a bully, and using her power (and audience) in social media to force a company to give her a new product for free. Others hail Armstrong as a hero who was merely demonstrating the principles of capitalism and free trade – customers who don't get what they want demand better service – publicly, loudly and for all to hear and see! What I draw from it is that social media is changing our expectations about communication with and around organizations. The democratization of the internet means that an individual has the power to demand a timely and satisfactory response to any comment, complaint or question, and furthermore is beginning to expect this response as a matter of course.

How long before a donor or supporter who is frustrated by an organization's actions lashes out in a public way on Twitter or Facebook or a blog? Something like this could be a public relations nightmare, or it could be a great opportunity, as demonstrated by the following example. A great case-study in social media listening comes from Wendy Harman, a social media integrator for the American Red Cross. Wendy tells a story of coming across a personal blog post written by someone who was extremely dissatisfied with a class taught by her local Red Cross chapter. Since Wendy viewed the critique as an opportunity, she forwarded the comment on to a chapter director, who contacted the blogger directly. Days later, the blogger wrote about what happened and said "Someone found my blog post and told the local chapter director. He called to talk to me about it honestly. They care about me and are willing to go the extra mile This gives the American Red Cross huge points. I am now significantly more likely to take another class than I was before" (Ferguson)

I don't mean to imply that listening to our donors is limited only to troubleshooting or resolving customer service-type complaints. Audiences are no longer satisfied with communication as transactional. A paradigm shift has taken place that is driving organizations to create new and innovative ways of allowing audiences to interact with "the work." Online communities, message boards, even the ability to e-mail, instant message or find an organization on a social media website is now considered standard expectations. In 2008 Michael Edson was hired by The Smithsonian Institution to be the Director of Web and New Media Strategy. What he did over the next 18 months was nothing short of phenomenal. Edson decided that in order to create a truly 21<sup>st</sup> century strategy around using social media, that the process would need to be, well, social. Edson

states “The strategy was created through a fast, transparent, public-facing process that included workshops, the Smithsonian 2.0 conference, Twitter, You Tube and on-going collaboration through a public-wiki. Transparency, openness and speed were used to overcome obstacles and gather the input of hundreds of people inside and outside the institution.” Edson’s use of social media to bring the Smithsonian into the social media age is considered groundbreaking, and among the best and highest uses of social media by a non-profit. (Edson)

Audiences are no longer satisfied being passive receivers of information, they want to be heard and have a voice. Corporations or organizations can’t continue to act as though our supporters, customers or donors are passively engaged in the work we do. Long gone are the days when we could send a letter, and then sit back and let the checks come rolling in. (Has it ever been that easy, anyway?) Technology allows audiences to have a voice, and also demands that we listen. Only when we invite our donors to talk to us will we develop the two-way relationship modern individuals have come to expect.

### **USING SOCIAL MEDIA, WE CAN RAISE THE LEVEL OF OUR STORYTELLING.**

Any good fundraiser knows that the most effective way to illicit support – financial or otherwise – is to distil what we do into a moving and pertinent story. The more powerfully we tell our story, the more support we get. This new, immediate, two-way communication created by social media enables us in the non-profit sector to show what we do with more clarity and more impact than ever before. Donors want to hear how their money is helping and know that their support is being leveraged to its utmost potential. They want to know how decisions are made and get a glimpse into the everyday operations of the non-profit – with this new ownership, after all, it is theirs, too! They want to know where their donations are going. By drawing our donors and supporters into a day-to-day interaction with an organization, our story becomes part of their individual stories. For example, the British charity event “Red Nose Day” does a great job of engaging their supporters all year long by updating content regularly, and then incorporating feedback from Twitter, Facebook and You Tube into the planning of the next event. As of this writing, the charity had nearly 200,000 “fans” on Facebook, and one quick visit to the Facebook page confirms that Red Nose Day staffers take an active and engaged approach with the public, by responding to questions, comments and sharing photos and video.

In addition to giving our message greater availability, social media also allows us to tell our stories, as they unfold, in real time. For example, after the devastating Haiti Earthquake of

early 2010, the American Red Cross was able to raise \$5 million in 48 hours from using only social media. On January 12, 2010, the same day that a massive earthquake struck the impoverished nation of Haiti, The American Red Cross posted this tweet: “You can text “HAITI” to 90999 to donate \$10 to Red Cross relief efforts in #haiti.” Within 2 days, more than 500,000 mobile phone subscribers did just that. (Van Grove)

It is true that not all non-profits have the audience or the resources of the American Red Cross, and therefore some may argue that this new paradigm will create more work; that this kind of immediacy and transparency comes with inherent and unknown risks. To be sure, allowing the “audience” into the inner-workings of what we do is inconvenient at best, and terrifying at worst. And storytelling is already something we need to get better at – philanthropic organizations talk about the importance of “telling the story,” yet more often than not, we spend more time on tax receipts, mailing lists, and donor databases than we do on sharing the impact of philanthropy in our communities. But we no longer have that luxury. The paradigm is not *shifting* it has already *shifted*. The new reality is here, and to continue to be relevant, organizations must use every tool at our disposal – social media being one of the most effective – to tell a vivid and unfolding story or suffer the consequences.

### **WE MUST ALLOW DONORS TO PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE, TO HELP CREATE THE STORY.**

Audiences are no longer satisfied consuming content. And they aren’t even completely fulfilled by responding to content. Audiences want to be *creators* of content. After all, every 60 seconds 24 hours of new content are uploaded to YouTube. (Kagan) So clearly, audiences have a new expectation for the creation and consumption of media. What does this mean for philanthropy? It means our organizations no longer own our story. Our supporters do. Donors, board members, staff, even people who are only familiar with a charity have the ability to create content about and for our organizations. Kanter and Fine give us another great example of how storytelling can be co-created with our audiences. In their example, they cite a blog written by a homeless shelter staffer detailing why a homeless person would choose to live on the street rather than use a shelter. A number of professionals wrote comments and weighed in on the matter, and then came “SlumJack Homeless” – who shared his personal story about why he would rather stay on the streets than live in a shelter. The post was widely read, and is a great example of an extremely compelling first-person story that has great power to impact opinions, change minds, and stimulate

discussion around an issue. (Kanter & Fine, 143) Allowing all interested parties to help tell the story makes the story even more potent.

Social media is not only providing opportunity for new voices to bring authoritative and unique insight to the stories told by non-profits, but social media has actually afforded the opportunity for individuals *to create a new story*. Twitter and other social media tools have been credited with helping people get resources where most needed after natural disasters, and with helping victims of violence in Africa protect one another. In January 2008 Kenya was in the midst of a deepening crisis after a presidential election was held that was seen by many citizens as deeply flawed. Post-election violence had flared up all over the country, leaving scores of people dead, and thousands fleeing the country. Because of the crisis, news broadcasts had been suspended, and so Kenyan's around the world relied on bloggers, and social media to gather information about what was happening in their country.

At that time, a blogger, Ory Okolloh had an idea to combine social media with technology. Together, with some colleagues, she launched a website called "Ushahidi" which is described as "a communication forum that allows anyone to report cases of violence through text message, e-mail or web submission, and to portray the information on an online map." Using social media tools, as well as mobile phones citizens came together to collect and verify data, and ultimately save the lives of their fellow citizens. Today the template that the website Ushahidi created has been used in many different situations – to monitor election results in developing nations, to get humanitarian aid where most needed, and most recently, to monitor the New York City winter storm crisis of 2010. Though there is no data available yet, many are crediting this type of "real-time" storytelling and reporting with allowing government, and social services agencies to better meet the needs of their constituencies. With this level of involvement becoming the norm, we are presented a need and an opportunity to follow suit. We must take advantage of social media to allow the donors we are trying to reach to make our story their story too.

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