

Building civil society portals

(Reflections by practitioners)

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Resources

Introduction

For many civil society organizations (CSOs) worldwide, the key factor to success is the efficiency with which they manage to make their voice heard, distribute information, find the right access to the most up-to-date information, as well as the efficiency with which they communicate with their partners. An internet portal is usually the most cost-effective tool that provides for all these needs. Portals are no longer one-way information channels - an online version of bulletin boards intended to be only passively read. They are increasingly being used in more interactive ways and have become a powerful tool for fostering community participation as well as a unique platform for cooperation.

But how can civil society organizations that commonly work on a tight budget venture into portal projects? What if their staff are not familiar with the use of information and communications technology (ICT)? What if the potential recipients of their information are people with difficult access to the internet? And what should CSO portals look like in order to meet the demands specific to civil society activities?

These and many similar questions have been addressed by ICT specialists from a number of CSO organizations working together in the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). The outcomes of their work motivated APC to organize an online learning event dedicated to distinct approaches to building and running CSO portals. The event took place in July 2003, on the APC Content list, the workspace of one of APC's communities of practice – *Information Workers Network*. Over two hundred participants signed up, coming both from small and newly emerging CSOs as well as large established organizations with a lot of experience with internet portal management.

This paper summarizes the most interesting experiences and ideas shared during the event. It has been compiled in response to positive feedback about the event from participants. The paper is divided into seven sections, covering a number of challenges and tips associated with building and running civil society portals, such as news production by civil society organizations, building communities of collaborators, and the use of certain IT tools. The fact that some topics are given more space than others does not necessarily mean they are more important – they simply received more attention during discussions.

About the Association for Progressive Communications

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is an international network of civil society organizations dedicated to empowering and supporting groups and individuals through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially internet-related technologies. APC and its members pioneer practical and relevant uses of ICTs for civil society, especially in developing countries. APC is an international facilitator of civil society's engagement with ICTs and related concerns, in both policy and practice.

Key terms

Portal

A web portal is a "supersite" on the internet that attempts to provide the maximum of its users' internet needs, in one location. Portals commonly offer services such as searching, content, newsfeeds, e-mail, online chat rooms, gaming, links to other sites, and so on.

(based on definition by: Darwin - www.darwinmag.com)

Civil society portal

Civil society portals are usually distinguished from most other portals by focusing less on entertainment and commerce while placing more emphasis on the promotion of CSOs (civil society organizations) and issues relevant to civil society, such as human rights and the environment.

Accordingly, they offer specific services related to these issues while they rarely feature others, common to non-CSO portals (stock quotes, weather information...)

Information gateway (IG)

Information gateway type portals review, annotate and classify content on other websites. Usually, they include a visual taxonomy or simple set of categories that helps people find information as well as a search engine. In a CSO context, gateway or clearinghouse sites tend to organize information around a particular issue or topic such as the environment, development or gender.

Content management system (CMS)

CMSs are systems that interconnect databases and web page templates. They allow the creating of dynamic websites that enable online publishing by editors without a profound knowledge of web design.

E-newsletter (e-bulletin)

An electronically distributed newsletter, usually focused on specific topics. E-newsletters often belong among services provided by portals.

Mailing list

A mailing list is a way of having a group discussion by electronic mail and distributing announcements to a large number of people. Each time a member of the list posts a reply to the conversation, it is distributed to the e-mail box of every member of the list. All of this traffic is automated and managed by programs called mailing list managers.

(based on definition by: Learn the Net - www.learnthenet.com)

Copyleft policy

In the context of online publishing, copyleft policy is a policy of free distribution and re-publishing of online content. A classic example of copyleft licensing is the GNU Free Documentation License (<http://www.gnu.org/licenses/licenses.html#FDL>).

Civil society organization (CSO)

The term "civil society organization" (CSO) describes organizations that are engaged in development but are not part of the government or business sectors. Depending on the usage of particular countries, CSOs of different kinds have been called "charities", "private voluntary organizations", "voluntary organizations", and (usually) "NGOs".

(based on the definition by UNDP - www.undp.org)

I. Information gateway (IG): organization and management

Building and running an IG-type portal creates a whole range of challenges. Some, such as securing funding and building a community of users, are similar for other types of portals, while others are specific to information gateways. Besides funding, the major issues associated with IG portal management are organizing editing work, accessing up-to-date resources, and finding the right balance for the portal's size and focus.

a) Access to new resources

With online resources growing rapidly all the time, it is ever more challenging to monitor all the information of potential interest for publishing on our IG portal. We can no longer be satisfied with an editor simply checking known resources, browsing the internet for new ones and subscribing to dozens of e-newsletters. Even though these activities still constitute the core of most editors' work, we need to look for new ways to simplify their search and make the information "come" to them. Seeking assistance from our "web community" and sharing the responsibility for portal maintenance with others are two such strategies.

1. Suggestions from the public

*"... the most important strategy here would be to build a user community of active and regular contributors. Particularly if one has an IG such as Women'sNet which deals with many subject areas of relevance to the women's movement. If contributors feel that they are part of a "known" community and can see the benefits of their contributions the process is more effective."
(Jennifer Radloff – Women'sNet)*

Naturally, we cannot be fully informed about all the good content that is out there. However, there is a fair chance that the people who visit our site also know about relevant and useful content elsewhere on the internet. A highly visible notice on the website and an e-mail address where they can send contributions can work well. Or else, an online form enabling users to send information directly to a database can save time. Content suggested by users still needs editorial attention. If a portal is to be credible, the posting of anonymous content directly online is not a good idea. Even when contributors provide valuable material, a fair amount of time might still need to be spent editing an article's graphics, paragraphs, line spacing, and HTML code in order to make it comply with our site. It is also probable that we would end up binning the majority of anonymous suggestions, as they are NOT quite what we wish to publish. Useable contributions received in this way are a nice bonus.

As mentioned by Jennifer Radloff, online suggestions from users can grow both in frequency and quality if we succeed in building a community around the portal. For more details, see [III. Building a community of users](#) on page 11.

2. Content sharing

An IG portal may have been set up by a consortium, or we may develop cooperation with partners who are experts in the field, during the project implementation. In either case, we would probably want to enable these organizations to contribute with their content. Many content management systems (CMSs) enable content sharing between different sites running on the same or even different servers. This function helps us to get content from other sites onto our site (and vice versa) automatically, or semi-automatically. Although such systems seemingly bring us closer to the ideal of an autonomous and fully automatic portal, the reality is different; the editor's role does not become any less important. And if the proportion of our portal's content generated via content sharing is large, we are going to face a number of new challenges. These include acquiring consent from copyright owners, technological constraints, management demands and the poor

When we want other groups to participate in our project through sharing content with our IG portal, issues of compatibility of categories, style and format of the content are likely to occur. When those organizations are experts in a subject matter, it is a good idea to create categories as well as rules for content format in cooperation with them, rather than impose a system on them. However, we must be the leaders in such a process. Firstly, we know the overall mission of the project and can see the broader picture. Secondly, although experts in their fields, our partners might not be advanced ICT users; they might insert categories and formats that are not suitable for use on internet portals. For example, in the case of information classification, a strictly librarian approach could be quite counter productive.

motivation of participants. These challenges are dealt with in more detail in [IV. Consortium portal projects](#) on page 14.

b) Keeping links alive

“There are also already existing technology solutions that will check for dead links. But I used these only periodically. I found it really important to review the site and links myself and do my own housecleaning - not only for dead links, but for overall quality and presentation.” (Jillaine Smith - Foundations on Today's Strategies for Social Change)

Several CMSs enable checking for dead links automatically. That can be a great help where the IG portal grows to such a size that it is impossible to check all links manually. However, experience shows that it is advisable to do this checking manually as much as possible, as part of regular site maintenance. This not only allows us to make sure the links “really work”, but it also keeps us aware of the general state of the portal and how up-to-date published content is; it also alerts us to missing information and possibilities for further development. Entrusting the link checking process solely to a computer can lull us into a false sense that the portal is being taken care of without the need for us to invest much time and attention.

Up to a certain point, we can avoid dead links on our portal (as a result of changed URLs to which they are pointing) by publishing the full content. However, such a solution is limited due to copyright issues and the significant increase in editorial work it requires.

c) Knowing our users

We can't fully succeed in developing and running any kind of portal without knowing who our users are, what they are looking for and where they have come from to reach our site. This is a wider issue than just knowing how to target our promotion. We need to know our users in order to identify what content to search for and publish, and how we should deliver it to them. The implications stemming from such statistics can be very practical: if we know that our portal's end users have very low connectivity (or they are not even internet users, getting our materials second-hand), the proportion of material designed for downloading will be much higher, compared to online browseable articles. Similarly, low connectivity amongst users motivates us to put more stress on distributing information via e-mail, which is easier to download when time online is expensive.

Although we need to know our users' profile well, the reality is often far from that. The results of online questionnaires are likely to be too poor to give us any useful picture, unless we can afford to convert the questions into a lottery with a good prize. We may gain some information from feedback we receive via e-mail or from people involved in online discussions. For the most part, however, we have to be content with analysing web and e-newsletter statistics.

Statistics

“At the methodology level, there is a need to start by asking 'what are we trying to evaluate?' Most people look at web stats, see big (or little) numbers and leave it at that. However, they haven't really learned much ... and certainly haven't answered questions that will help them improve what they are doing. The better approach is to start (...) with a list of questions you need answers to. 'How much additional traffic is going to southern partners? What kinds of material is most favoured by members?' Once you know these questions, you can try to build a technical and stats analysis strategy around it.” (Mark Surman - Rabble)

Totals of pageviews and hits are usually available, but such numbers by themselves are rarely of much value. Especially in the case of joint projects based on content sharing, it is important to be able to trace click-throughs, so that members of the network can see the benefits of collaboration in promoting their own sites. Some technical tools for tracking users' movements are available, often allowing even the tracking of clicks from e-newsletters to external resources; many e-newsletter packages allow us to create 'tokens' that track click-throughs. The links embedded in an e-newsletter first of all transfer the user through a server for tracking purposes only and then subsequently on to the final URL.

Statistics such as the number of registered users or subscribers for e-bulletins show us directly the number of people who are actually engaged with a site.

d) Letting users know our portal is alive and worth visiting regularly

The nature of IG-type portals usually means that they *are relatively static*, especially compared to news portals. Still, it is essential that the visitor sees at the first glance that our portal is not one of the internet's abandoned Flying Dutchmen. We should add a date to every published item and we might also consider getting a "what's new" section on our homepage. Even when our site does not change frequently, it is good to show that there is steady progress and new contributions can be expected to appear in future. Making this clear can make a big difference, convincing a user to come back to our site again.

e) Quantity versus quality of information

Should the portal be comprehensive? Should it contain as many materials relevant to a particular area as we can find, or only a selection? Trying to cover everything to create a completely comprehensive (all-embracing) portal is a tempting idea, although due to the nature of the internet we can never succeed completely. However, it is through making a good selection, and not through sheer volume of items, that we can make a site popular.

In the early days of the internet, compiling all the available resources made sense as we could give users a choice of selecting from all the existing resources and deciding which would serve them best. Nowadays, we must help with this choice and do the pre-selection ourselves, as our users are busy people, often having to navigate a sea of information.

...I remember telling a communications director about the site at Benton (this was before its last redesign). She talked with me later: 'I printed out a bunch of stuff, but there was simply too much; I didn't have enough time to go through it all. The people we serve are busy, over-worked, and need help.' (Jillaine Smith - Foundations on Today's Strategies for Social Change)

Overdosing the user with information can lead to him/her getting lost on our pages. When the demanded information is shovelled under dunes of files and pages, the effect is similar to that of a site with poor information - people don't find what they are looking for.

f) Keeping resources relevant

A qualified relevant selection requires an editor who is an expert in the subject dealt with by the IG portal. Where editing responsibilities are distributed among several editors, the rules for content selection must be precisely defined. However, not only new contributions must go through this type of censorship. As the portal develops and grows, some material will become less important and older resources will become obsolete to the point that their information value is minimal. Although such house cleaning might be difficult, it is necessary to remove these items and reduce the content to a minimum number of resources, which provide the greatest amount of help. After all, publishing on the internet has still some limits that bear a resemblance to paper publishing. Here we are not limited by space on the page. However, we are limited by each user's capacity to process the information he/she is provided with.

Archive

We must be able to decide which is the most relevant material and which is most likely to be sought after by users. Still, there will always be some users who look for resources which have failed our relevance test. When we do our house cleaning, we might therefore consider not dumping the outdated content completely but moving it to the archives. That way, the user not only sees at the first glance what materials are most relevant, but also gets the option to search in the "second league" if he/she is not successful in the first one.

According to some portal developers, large comprehensive portals tend to become cumbersome and confusing. Therefore it is preferable to focus on developing networks of smaller, specific portals with a narrow focus. These can be more flexible and easier to fund, manage and develop. An example of such a project is www.byronbaykm.com – a network of small, 20–100 person communities of practice.

g) A few notes on grassroots and "cashroots" IG portal projects

It seems that in terms of sustainability and profile, the best start in life for an IG-type portal is when its creation is driven by the information needs of participating organizations. When organizations active in the same field are able to meet over a joint IG project, the costs of maintaining the portal can be reduced to a minimum through using shared applications. This grassroots motor is most likely to keep the project moving ahead because:

1. Participating organizations' daily work reflects the needs of the real life situations they are dealing with, such as training, child healthcare, monitoring multinationals or the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
2. Grassroots needs-powered CSO/activist projects are less likely to suffer from common problems such as exaggerated tendencies to copyright information (as opposed to free content distribution), crises of focus or profile, or losing contact with users' needs.
3. These sorts of IG portal projects are more likely to be based on a distributed input/distributed output model, not on centralized information storage. Participating organizations can re-publish aggregated information and see the direct benefit of participation in the project.
4. Through sharing work in a joint information project, the portal can further foster the community of practice character within the circle of participating organizations.

At the other end of the scale, gigantic portal projects engineered and financed centrally tend to suffer from problems common to all centralized initiatives developed by non-CSO subjects "for" the civil society sector (e.g. Development Gateway):

1. Participating civil society organizations are rarely representative of particular areas and their role in defining the direction of project development is usually rather marginal. Such portals tend to be all-inclusive, which leads to loss of focus. Consequently, the cost/effect ratio of projects is likely to be poor, as well as their development towards self-sustainability.
2. Similar projects usually centralize information, which militates against a distributed output strategy or an open content policy. (Since so much capital is invested, the effect has to be visible in measurable units, whether these are page-hits or click-throughs from other sites.)
3. Projects of this type tend to have a poor profile among other CSOs – potential partners.

Moreover, the risk that project development will respond to the founders' demands rather than to real needs grows with the amount of money invested by any single entity, whether that is a corporation, government or other institution.

II. Content dissemination: letting users know about our site's new content

Finding the right resources and building a high quality IG portal is just the first part of the job. It is equally important to be successful in letting users know about resources we have collected, and to deliver them in the right format. People come to a site only if the published information is useful for them and if you let them know why they should come.

a) E-newsletters

"It's sort of funny to think that the most important technology in the 'portal' world is e-mail. In the mid-1990s, everyone was rushing onto the web and away from e-mail lists and newsgroups. What's emerged in the last few years is an understanding that you need to use all of these formats in concert with each other if you really want to engage people." (Mark Surman - Rabble)

Time and time again, e-mail proves to be the most successful tool for delivering the information to users. It has been proven through the experience of many portal developers that sending out e-newsletters with "what's new" information about an IG portal is very likely to boost the numbers of visitors considerably.

1. E-mail as a tool

There are two main positive effects stemming from the use of e-newsletters. Firstly, they have the potential to attract readers to our portal, both through repeatedly reminding them about its existence and by throwing them "hooks" about newly filed resources. Secondly, through e-mails we can deliver the content to readers who otherwise (for technological or other limitations) simply would not get to read it.

"We should try to separate our own "marketing goals" (sending out e-mails to get traffic and "brand awareness") from the user's "working pattern" - getting the right information at the right place, in the right format." (Rolf Kleef - AIDEnvironment)

There are two distinct approaches to making resources available to readers using e-mail newsletters. The most commonly used approach is to describe new resources and make it necessary for readers to visit our site before they can find links to particular external resources. A typical example is the e-newsletter *The Drum Beat* whose descriptions link to *the Comminit site* (<http://www.comminit.com/>).

The other approach is to include links to external resources directly in the e-newsletter. That way we don't force the user to make the interim visit to our portal. An example is the e-newsletter of the Scout Report archives (<http://scout.wisc.edu/archives/>).

"As a user, I find the Drum Beat approach annoying. I want to get to the resource itself, not to a mediating site. As a "portal person", though, I can see the value of driving users to their site first (though some of the value is diminished if the technique annoys users). In deciding what approach will be most appropriate for ItrainOnline, we will need to think not just about driving people to the site (as an end in itself), but more broadly in terms of what we want the initiative to achieve, and make the newsletter an integral part of the initiative, rather than an adjunct to the portal." (Ann Tothill - APC)

Although the second approach seemingly "deprives" our portal of some publicity (by sending users directly to external resources), it might prove often more effective than the first strategy. Our initiative may gain good credit and become popular simply for giving the users what they want. And they always want to make a minimum number of clicks before getting to the resource. Reducing the route to content to a minimum can become a key factor, especially where our users struggle with connectivity problems.

2. Creating e-newsletters

Although sending out e-newsletters has the potential to make a great difference, we might end up not opting for this simply because we lack capacity. Creating and sending e-newsletters and

administering a database of recipients could well represent a task that consumes a big part of our time reserved for portal editing. Some CMSs (including ActionApps) have been developed to do a good part of this work for us. Using such systems, we can select the content added over a defined period of time, paste the descriptions and links in one message and send it to a stored directory of e-mail addresses.

The system can do this periodically and automatically which, in combination with automatic online subscriptions, means that the e-newsletters can be issued without our intervention. However, the autonomous robot approach is not necessarily the best option. Some users prefer to read a couple of human lines at the beginning of every issue, showing that the newsletter is a summary reviewed by an editor for them. A newspaper-like short editorial at the beginning of every issue will make the message more digestible for many. The CMSs mentioned above give us the option of adding such commentary.

3. Selecting content and format for e-newsletter

We should not content ourselves with having last week's contributions pasted into a message and simply sending it out to all the contacts in our directory. If we want our e-newsletters to be read, they must meet the preferences of every recipient to the maximum level possible. The subscribers should be allowed to decide what sort of information they are interested in (provided that the portal is divided into sections, categories etc.), how often they wish to receive the digest and what format it should have (plain text, HTML, images included, etc.). These preferences reflect the working patterns of the users as well as their technology and connectivity possibilities. Being flexible in meeting these preferences can enhance the popularity of our e-newsletters significantly.

Again, some new CMSs (including APC ActionApps) enable users to set up a number of preferences when performing online subscription to newsletters. The preferences can be changed at any time using a password issued during the subscription.

4. Building a mail directory

Building a database of e-mails can take long time. It is great to have a chance to build on previous activities and have access to the e-mail directory of a "community" whose members we have good reason to believe could be interested in being informed about our IG portal. However, there is the "ethical" issue of recipients receiving messages they haven't specifically requested. How tricky this issue is depends on where we collected the addresses from and how much we know about their owners. The issue of unsolicited e-mails becomes more and more sensitive as the proportion of Spam in all our inboxes grows. We should consider asking the e-mail holders to subscribe before sending them the e-newsletter (showing them a sample of an issue). Simple instructions on how to unsubscribe should be included in all e-newsletter messages.

Online subscriptions are an easy way to collect addresses for our e-newsletter directory, especially if we can use subscription verifying tools.

Employing e-mail in combination with an IG portal also has a significant community dimension. Through building up an e-newsletter list, we are in effect creating a pool of supporters and community members. For more on the community aspects of producing and sharing e-newsletters, see [III. Building a community of users](#) on page 11.

5. Frequency of e-newsletters

*"...if the weekly update doesn't bring a good amount of new articles to the portal/site, it's better to send a newsletter every 15 days, at least. In my opinion, a monthly newsletter can become too long and people stop reading it in the middle. I prefer to send it shorter, in shorter periods of time. Makes people remember of the website more frequently and enhances the visitation".
(Graciela Saleimen - Rits)*

Sometimes we don't have the possibility to let users decide the frequency of bulletin delivery. When our portal is not built on a content management system, or it does not enable us to send out newsletters automatically, we have to compose them manually and decide in what periods they will be sent out. In some cases, we might want to make this decision even when our system allows

configuration by users; either the character of the content requires a specific period of delivery or we have users whom we cannot expect to perform the configuration.

Crossbreeding web portals with e-mail based tools – helping to close the gap

The wider interconnectedness of a web portal and e-mail also fosters the all-inclusive character of our initiative. Some of our users (members of our portal's community) may not have easy access to the web. Whilst the "portal" aspect of what we do meets many needs, it is also important for people on very low bandwidth connections to be able to participate in the community and share knowledge without being "second class citizens". In this context, it's not without interest that some CMSs experiment with submissions via e-mail, enabling users and collaborators to publish online (sending an item to Dbase) by sending e-mail to a specific address.

For the same reasons, we should look into making the full portal content available via e-mail to those who prefer it. Although we are limited by copyright permissions as well as our various portal-running strategies, inclusiveness and care for those with low connectivity should be high on our priority list. Besides, it can prove to be a better marketing strategy than it seems at first glance: *"people use websites if they find useful, clear information, but prefer e-mail when they are given the opportunity and are really interested in the subject/issue"*. (Giancarlo - ActiveLink)

b) Alternative information sharing

*"...portal-keepers should be looking into such things as RSS and at least better use of META tags so that data can be transmitted and shared more effectively, and automated tools can be used to represent *and deliver* information to readers *based on their interests* - not only in content but in delivery mechanism". (Jillaine Smith - Foundations on Today's Strategies for Social Change)*

Facilitating easy and simple access to our information is increasingly important as we compete for the attention of people whose time online or time in general is a precious commodity.

III. Building a community of users

Civil society portals do not function on a typical firm-customer relationship. Our users are also interested in issues that go beyond the purely material values which (we like to believe) link them with our portal. If our work is useful for them and motivates them to take active steps, we are well on the way to creating a community associated with our portal. Online community is the greatest resource we have and it is the key to a civil society portal's success. We can foster such a community if we encourage users to understand that they have a place there and if we give them the opportunity to communicate with us, participate in portal development and connect with each other.

The stronger and more active such a community is, the better. The following tools can stimulate users to have more active involvement with our portal:

a) Communicating with the user

It is important to show clearly that the portal is not one-way communication channel. The user who wants to write to us (whether to suggest changes, commend or trounce us) should have this opportunity. We should react to all suggestions and feedback we get from users promptly and not too formally. However, depending on the success of our portal and the profile of our users, the amount of communication might outgrow our capacity to respond¹. Still, at least our e-mail contact should not be missing since: a) it makes users feel we care about their opinion, and b) this way, we might receive suggestions that are valuable for our work.

"Several years ago our portal was very basic and very boring. Very few visitors. We had to sit and think of what would be the content of importance to our targeted audiences. We asked them and the improvement is significant - we even got new audiences such as students and unemployed." (Danijela Babic - ZaMirNet)

Feedback from users can be a vital tool for evaluating our work. Through it, we can learn who our user community is and what the issues are that directly matter to its members. When we are missing this information, we should consider stimulating such feedback the way ZaMirNet did.

b) Personalizing our profile

A good way to approach building our portal community is to visibly make ourselves part of it. Our team should not be a faceless "somebody", hidden behind technology. It is good to publish some information about the journalists and editors who bring information to the community. Publishing a few personal lines about us or even a picture can make the portal (and communication through it) more personal.

c) Online discussions

Through creating discussion forums we let the users express their opinion about the issues we cover. Such discussions can be inspiring, giving users the power to add their opinion to the content we produce. Achieving success with lively discussion forums depends very much on the topic we cover and it is also quite culturally specific. In some cultures, people are used to expressing their opinions in public more than in others. There also are issues that have generally bigger potential to trigger lively discussions than others (yes, *feminism* and *politics*...).

Discussions can be stimulated through organized chats. The experience of the Brazilian portal Rits which organizes chat discussions with controversial people on controversial topics proved that getting people involved this way can work.

¹ If we run out of capacity and know that we will not be able to respond within a reasonable period of time, we might consider sending an automated response explaining the situation to the user. For example, when writing to the British branch of Friends of the Earth, the server sends the following automatic response: "We get hundreds of e-mails each week and answer them in strict rotation. We will do our best to reply to yours within five working days. If your e-mail is for a different team or person here, we will hurry it along to them".

"...Rits invited a social scientist which is also a writer, who has been expressing his controversial ideas about violence in the mainstream media - defending that those who face hunger have the right to be violent. It was a first experience, and we sent invitations to those people subscribed to receive the Citizenship newsletter. Also, we published a note about the chat in Rets. (...) - during one hour, there was an average of 15 people discussing with our "guest" and making questions". (Graciela Saleimen - Rits)

d) E-newsletters

According to one of the definitions, a portal's community members are those who at least let us jam their mailboxes with e-newsletters they signed for. Either way, enabling the user to receive our content regularly by mail helps us to expand the "community" of people who follow (and hopefully appreciate) what we do.

My strategy was pretty intentional: when I sent out the first e-newsletter announcing the Best Practices Toolkit, I sent it to the organizations or individuals whose content I was pointing to: "Just wanted you to know... I've started compiling resources... and I've included a link to your excellent article about online advocacy..." As the e-newsletter gained in popularity, people started sending me links to information that they wanted included in the "toolkit" and publicized. Their "contributing of content" served themselves as well as my effort. (Jillaine Smith - Foundations on Today's Strategies for Social Change)

"The advantage of e-newsletters is that they provide a good foundation for taking action and running campaigns. As you build up your e-newsletter list, you are in effect creating a pool of supporters and community members - people who are interested in what you are doing. This is a perfect group of people to approach when you want people to sign on to an advocacy campaign, volunteer their time, suggest new links for your site or even solicit online donations." (Mark Surman - Rabble)

e) Mailing lists

A mailing list is a great tool for building a community around our portal. By allowing people to participate in specifically focused mail conferences, we not only let them learn from other participants, but also enable them to share their knowledge relevant to the issue. The outcomes of mailing list discussions can give us lots of material for our articles. It is a great advantage if we motivate and facilitate such conferences since we can interconnect discussions with the portal and stimulate the development of a community that perceives our portal as a point of reference. When publishing an article relevant to the conference, we send a message to the list with a "hook" leading to the portal.

Through mail conferences, we indirectly motivate and enable members to contribute to our portal.

f) The community's contribution to our work

"I take the people who pops up by themselves as a nice extra, but I don't count on them. I don't expect them either. I've started to support orgs in the process of getting used to disseminate infos through the web. even though it's not technically difficult to disseminate infos through dynamic web sites and through listservs, it's a way of communicating that puts us on a larger scale. we get to be more connected through more networks and people." (Nicole Nepton - Cybersolidaires)

One important aspect of portal community building is to give users the ability to contribute directly to our work. The extent to which this can work depends very much on the focus of our portal. Still, there is always a chance that some users will provide information that is beneficial to our work or even material that is suitable for direct publishing calendars of events, link directories, job announcements etc.). If a user suggests such an item, we should show our appreciation (an e-mail expressing our thanks) and credit him/her on the site, if appropriate. When refusing a suggestion, we should not forget to give the user the reason. We might also want to provide some instructions regarding the desired focus or format of suggested items, especially if there is a chance that the user could contribute regularly. Such correspondence can be time consuming; however, pre-prepared universal messages can cut the time required to a minimum.

Commonly, those who do contribute with valuable content are other CSOs, rather than individual users. We can stimulate the development of a community of such collaborating organizations. It

has proved to be effective to send announcements like “just to let you know, we published info about your booklet...” to people whose organization or work we are featuring. In this way, they will learn that our site exists. If we are consistent enough, there is a fair chance that in future they will send us announcements about new content and save us the work of finding it ourselves.

In the case of organizations that we can consider part of our portal’s community, it is easier to know who these members are, what their level of credibility is and which factors associate them with our portal. Consequently, it is easier to offer them additional “extras” that can further strengthen their ties with our portal. These can include outcomes from our information-based activities, such as access to grant databases, membership in thematic mail conferences, or participation in joint internet-related projects.

It takes a lot of time and effort to develop a community but it pays off! Building a community has a snowball effect: the bigger and stronger the community, the more beneficial it is to the portal and the greater the portal’s potential to inspire people and pull them all together.

The experience of Rabble, a Canadian CSO portal, shows that if we are really successful in building a community around our portal, it can even help our project to survive when we run into temporary difficulties.

“The thing we realized only part way through the project was that our biggest supporters were our readers. When we came to our first financial crisis, it was clear that the audience didn’t want us to shut down the site. So, we asked them to donate. They gave enough to get us through the crisis and have continued to give at various points since.” (Mark Surman - Rabble)

IV. Consortium portal projects

“Starting from little then building up the functionality in consultation with the group is intended to ensure that the group retains ownership of the project and the incubating organisation has a ‘light’ touch on the project. In this way we hope to retain the engagement and commitment of the group which is necessary for a model based on distributed input. We hope that by relying on the submission of content from this group, whether manually or automatically, that there will be little or no need for editorial intervention, keeping the costs down and minimising the impact of the administrating/incubating organisation.” (Catherine Fisher - IFIwatchnet)

In terms of financial as well as “ideological” sustainability, it is often beneficial or even necessary that CSO portals are developed through cooperation between several organizations. That has not only economic benefits but it also brings multiple views to the project, making it more ideologically heterogeneous and more representative of the area it focuses on. A characteristic of such projects is that none of the cooperating organizations “owns” the portal and that the portal is used to amplify the reach of their information, as well as being representative of a particular area of focus. It seems that such joint projects have a big future since a number of similar ambitious initiatives have recently started up.

Joint portal projects usually aspire to be representative either regionally or thematically. Examples of thematically defined portals include the training resources directory (<http://www.itrainonline.org>) or the collaborative project between over 40 International Financial Institution-watching civil society groups (<http://www.ifwatchnet.org>). Examples of joint portal projects with regional profiles are the Brazilian portal Cidadania, networking 40 cooperating CSOs (www.cidadania.org) or the Congolese CSO portal Societecivile (<http://societecivile.cd>). Commonly, these joint portals combine both aspects – they aspire to be representative for a particular issue at a regional level. This applies to the joint portal on Canadian children's environmental health issues (<http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca>), the online resources directory of Czech civil society (<http://www.kormidlo.cz>), the Balkan region's environmental issues site (<http://www.see-environment.info>), as well as many others.

Joint projects, which are backed up by entities that are representative for a particular area, are generally easier to raise funds for as they have the potential to combine the best of all the participating organizations' information work. Such portals are likely to be credible not only for donors, but also for users themselves.

a) Coordination/governance

Although portals built on a partnership model are collective properties, there is usually a need for one organization to take the lead, commonly both in initiation and administration of the project. Usually, the leading organization is the one that has the capacity to fundraise or to incubate the project using its staff and resources. If an activity includes some 40 participating organizations and it is administered on a completely egalitarian basis, sooner or later it is likely to confront a number of management-related challenges.

Although having some leader at the helm of the project might be necessary, that also raises challenges.

“Disadvantages when one organisation is taking the lead on a joint project, particularly an organisation with credibility within the group, people are happy to sit back and let that organisation get on with it ongoing discussion list suffers from lack of focus and lack of motivation to participate in ongoing development the nominated contact within an organisation does not necessarily convey the development of the project to the rest of the organization.” (Catherine Fisher - IFIwatchnet)

When cooperation is engaged in only over the internet, these disadvantages become more accentuated and the management demands on the coordinator grow.

Experimenting with egalitarian governance

There are a number of joint portal projects with a highly democratic governance where all significant decisions are made by all project participants. Examples of projects based on a distributed leadership model are *Aid Workers Network* (www.aidworkers.net), an online community of development and relief practitioners, or the joint project *Societecivile* (<http://societecivile.cd>). At the time when this paper was written, the latter provided online publication space for over 270 Congolese CSO activities. The governance is undertaken by a "Collective" constituted of all the member organizations and it includes a training committee, an ethics committee and a management committee that deal with contributions from members.

Yet, where the number of participants in the network expands, the informal approach to governance comes under pressure and a more formalized system of governance must be sought:

"We have recently begun to address the issue of a more formalised system of governance for the project. (...) However we are at risk of a chicken and egg problem where the fuzzy governance could potentially hinder the making of contentious decisions about important issues like....governance." (Catherine Fisher - IFIwatchnet)

b) Shared responsibility for editing

"There can be value to distributed responsibility (for content editing), but it also raises particular management challenges. Keeping IG content regularly updated is much easier if the editor responsible for a topic is either working directly in the area, or personally passionate about it. If you know the topic thoroughly, are active in the area, and are subscribed to a lot of relevant listservers and newsletters, finding new resources is not a chore. In general new resources come to you, you check them out as part of your 'normal' work, and add them to the portal." (Ann Tohill – APC)

As with content sourcing, the responsibility for portal editing can be also shared by a number of partners... to some extent. Each partner might be responsible for a certain section of the portal or at least for the suitability of information that the organization feeds to the joint portal. However, there are limits to such shared responsibility: however well the cooperation works among participating partners, every portal needs a core team who oversee the project and have the final word on what is to be published and how. Such a team is necessary in order that the site develops a consistent profile.

c) Formalized cooperation

Although CSOs often tend to build cooperation only on trust and informal relations (which certainly has many positive aspects), we should consider a more formalized approach to cooperation when setting up a joint portal project, as we will be investing our time and resources in it. We should be careful not to neglect setting up binding rules for the type and format of cooperation of particular partners, frequency of contributions, involvement in portal administration, etc. Staff fluctuation in CSOs is generally high. We must make sure that each new contact person in a participating organization has some formal document to refer to and that he/she knows how he/she is supposed to collaborate on the joint portal. As similar joint projects are usually perceived to be *outside* individual organizations, they are the first to get abandoned when an organization is reducing activities.

Of course, trust is the fuel of cooperation, not agreements and papers. However, more formalized cooperation can avoid a lot of misunderstandings in the future, as well as prolong the life expectancy of a project.

Code of ethics

Where the scale of cooperating organizations/individuals is large and heterogeneous and where these have a high degree of autonomy regarding the content they publish, it has proved useful to develop a kind of *code of ethics*. Such documents outline what kind of content is not permitted for publication on the portal (materials promoting violence, inequality, racism etc.) and what penalties

are imposed when an organization or individual breaks the code (e.g. losing the right to participate).

d) Content sharing

Where participating organizations run their own site's publishing content relevant to a joint portal, the content sharing functions of CMSs can be used and the participants contribute to the joint portal by publishing content on their own sites. This is an ideal, sustainable but not always available solution. When potential partners do not have dynamic sites or there are problems with compatibility between systems, the partners can contribute using secure extranet online forms. However, for these organizations, cooperation on portal editing is work extra to their regular agenda and it might be more difficult to keep them motivated.

There are ways to increase the chance that such partners will stay actively committed to the project. If these organizations run *some* internet pages and our resources allow it, we can help them make a new section of their website which is dynamic and able to "talk" to our IG portal. A web page which features dynamic information we wish to feed into our portal is placed on our server. Through motivating them to work on *their* website, we indirectly motivate them to contribute actively to the joint project.

The user-friendly interfaces of CMSs used today make it possible for collaborators to need to manage only a text editor and online forms in order to participate in our initiative. Such activity is then highly inclusive and we don't lose out on input from people with a wealth of ideas on the subject matter but who are inexperienced ICT users.

e) Feedback on project development

The project coordinator's role doesn't end with motivating project partners in their level of active contribution or with supervising project development. An important part of his/her work is to evaluate the results and pass them on to partners. The number of provided contributions, as well as the number of visits and user ratings for particular sections and articles, constitute a good basis for such evaluation. Of course, the evaluation must be carried out in a way that doesn't make the project participants feel that they are being graded.

For example, the editors of Brazilian portal *Citizenship* use user ratings without publishing the results on the website. Monthly results are shared via e-mail with the group of CSOs who are considered to be collaborators of the portal. They are informed about the areas of the portal that received the most visits (editors avoid pointing out which were the "best rated" articles, but they highlight what were the best rated themes).

Passionate coordinator

Although the coordinator's role in the project is usually that of administrator and "the ICT person" (as opposed to the contributing organizations who, in many cases, are specialists in the subject matter but may lack experience with ICT), it is important that the coordinator is passionate about the subject.

*"If an editor is *not* personally or professionally active in the topic for which they are responsible regular updating becomes more difficult, and the contributions are likely to be of a lower quality." (Ann Tohill - APC)*

V. News aggregating

a) Content selection

“We find that having essentially ‘found our niche’ has helped us a lot to keep things focussed (and therefore more manageable and also more relevant to our site visitors). Even though our niche is quite narrow, we are evidently filling a need with our mixture of news and also resources on ICT for development and social justice.” (Karen Higgs - APC)

“... information (that we provide) should not be just any kind of information but something that can be used immediately for some campaign, coalition building, learning etc. People simply do not have time to read something they cannot use”. (Danijela Babic - ZaMirNet)

If we serve a local community but also decide to publish more “global” news, we should separate the global news from local items and the selected content should be thematically defined and organized. In time, when everybody is over-saturated with information, we should avoid aggregating a large number of distinct kinds of news together.

“...I think the keys here are (...) not aggregating everything together, but hand-picking the source of the news relative to a particular community”. (Mitra - Mitra Technology Consulting)

b) News format: links or full texts

“We always point to other sites. We would prefer that others who cite APC articles send their readers to the APC site to read the full article we have produced, so we try to do the same.” (Karen Higgs - APC)

When we publish news (as well as other content) published originally outside our portal, we have to deal with some issues related to its format. The first one we face is whether we publish only annotations with links leading to original sources or we re-publish the full stories of articles.

The first approach is significantly less demanding in terms of editorial work. However, such an approach is not very friendly to users with low connection speeds. Swapping between different sites/servers is slower than moving within one portal and if we are on dial-up, this difference can be quite noticeable. Besides, some users might find it a bit confusing after reading one part of the story to appear on different portal with different graphics and navigation. Finally, choosing this strategy is not the most effective one if we want to keep readers on our portal.

On the other hand, reprinting full articles raises not only capacity and copyright issues, but we might choose not to use this approach because of reasons relevant to our mission and goals. If the main mission of our work is to give voice to and promote other CSOs, there is no better service we can give them than attracting a user to their story and sending him/her to their web pages.

Republished full stories are sometimes found even in news sections that use links to original content as a rule. This solution must be used when the content is not available in a reliable format online on the site of its producer.

Both approaches are commonly used. The work pattern of APC lends itself to publishing annotations with links leading to original sources while the portals OneWorld, Cidania and others re-publish the full stories.

c) Locating news on the portal

“The greatest thing is that once the pages are set up you never actually have to manage them and you know that as long as there is a recent news item on news in that particular category then the static page will look really up-to-date.” (Karen Higgs - APC)

The classification and organization of news items and the use of the portal's *News section* doesn't need to end up looking like a long list of lastly added articles. Using modern CMSs we can make news items appear in several appropriate areas across a single site or maintain news archives on a variety of topics. That way, "fresh" information can be effectively interconnected with other, more static sections of our portal. This strategy enables us to change what often represents a weak point of portals which combine news and static material: users read the latest news but tend to ignore the other valuable documents in which we have invested a lot of time and energy.

d) Trusting resources

"It is the people that make the aggregation model work (...). Although we have agreements with all our partners, it is ultimately a relationship of trust that we have with partners which establishes the credibility of the content we aggregate. This is why we put as much emphasis on the vetting procedure of partners as onto the editorial process itself." (Alex Lockwood - OneWorld)

CSO portal editors often work with information from a variety of informal sources. This can give the results a genuine and much welcomed original character. On the other hand, it raises challenges related to the reliability of information. Unless we are sure about the source, we should verify all articles before publishing them on our portal, particularly if they include some kind of denouncements or campaigning. With capacity constraints common to CSO portal editors, it is often tempting to skip this phase of content production and take the information for granted. For this reason it is a great advantage to build a community of organizations who can provide us with their information and whom we can trust.

e) Frequency of news publication

"About the frequency of the updates, I find it counter productive to maintain a website which is not updated every week, at least. As a reader/visitor, I feel disappointed when I enter a website after one week and I get the same info. Having a weekly update makes websites "more alive", in my opinion." (Graciela Saleimen - Rits)

Generally, when managing a news portal, the "fresher" the articles are, the better. However, the quantity of our news production and its up-to-date nature are limited by the capacity of our editorial team. In some cases, this comprises just one person who does the job of journalist, editor and technician; in other cases, it may include a large board of professional editors and journalists.

f) User ratings

Some news portals give readers the option to rate articles. This feature gives a portal an interactive dimension, allowing the user to express him/herself. However, we should be sure of what we want to achieve before we show the rating results to users. Although ratings under each article can make the news section more attractive, we could end up having a large proportion of users reading only those articles which were rated as "best" by those who got involved in this *rating game*. We might not consider the same articles to be the most important and we may not want other readers to follow the individual tastes of a particular group. On the other hand, the results of ratings can be a useful analytical tool for portal editors.

Equally tricky is publishing listings with *the most visited* headlines. The most frequently read articles are not necessarily the best ones and such selection can significantly influence the manner in which some users approach our site. The correlation between quality of articles and number of visits is very dubious, as there is a strong snowball effect - the more clicks there are on an article, the higher it scores in the "*most read*" section and the more clicks it invites.

VI. News production by CSO portals

Most civil society portals feature a news section, which may only carry aggregated headlines or abstracts pointing to other sites, but could equally contain full stories. Few portals consist only of aggregated news, however. More commonly, news which is published, is used to complement information contained in other, more static sections of the portal. It is not uncommon for portal builders to start publishing news as something of a secondary product. They want to bring “fresh” information, drawing attention to other parts of the portal, or maybe they gain a prominent position on the internet in comparison with other CSOs, whose news they decide to promote.

“For us, it’s important to use news as a hook for the human instinct of seeking out new information, but to assume in our case those individuals also have the will to act for change; and then to take those users to activities for change.” (Alex Lockwood - OneWorld)

The proportion of news versus other information can vary greatly: from portals where the news section represents rather an animation of the homepage to others that are heavily based on publishing news. Lately, some news-only specifically focused portals have emerged, mostly as the result of consortium projects by regional or international networks working with specifically focused information in particular areas (www.see-environment.info).

a) In-house news production

As it is generally difficult to fundraise for civil society news production as well as to “sell” such news, a CSO portal with 100% in-house news production is rather an exception to the rule. However, a number of CSOs still produce and publish some in-house generated news on their portals, although the costs of journalists and editors are commonly covered by funds raised through information projects other than news services.

Shared costs of news production

For small CSOs, which cannot afford their own editorial staff, a good solution is to share costs between several organizations interested in publishing such content. A successful example is the experience of the group of South African organizations working in the field of women issues (including the South African APC member, Women’sNet). In 2001, during the World Conference Against Racism, they shared the cost of a journalist who covered an important meeting, on which all cooperating organizations wanted to provide information. Though this approach might not be sustainable for longer than the duration of the event, it can still bring very good results at a reasonable cost. APC was involved in a similar shared news production program in 2002, during the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre:

“The WSF had already helped independent news production by organising a ‘ciranda’ (or news circle). Any member of ciranda (and indeed anyone else who was interested) could share their own articles and reuse other people’s. APC shared our articles on ciranda and used some from there that were relevant to our niche. Of course as our niche is quite narrow, we ended up having to cover some events ourselves (...). This was actually a very fruitful experience for us because the few articles that we did have time to write were picked up by several mainstream news sources in Brazil who were covering the WSF. This allowed us to reach out beyond our interest group which is of great interest to us.” (Karen Higgs - APC)

Sometimes it is easier to share costs on journalists with a printed media partner CSO. As these papers are usually meant to address a slightly different readership than portals, parallel publishing there and online can be perceived by both editorial teams as being more complementary and less competitive than in the case of other electronic media with a similar profile.

Access to information resources

In order to produce our own news, we must have access to information about the issues we are covering. If we want to provide information about the activities of other CSOs, we must teach those

CSOs to get the information to us. Succeeding in this usually takes a long time and we must be very persistent in communication with these organizations. We must convince them that by getting the information to us, they are actually working on their own publicity and it can be potentially beneficial for their future profile, partnerships and fundraising. That is often more difficult than it sounds. CSOs often perceive PR as extra work that they cannot afford to invest time in.

1. Information sent directly by CSOs

Teaching CSOs to send us information is the long way round, but we can succeed. Most commonly we will start receiving their information via e-mail announcements, regular bulletins, press releases or other collective e-mails. In order to make sure the organizations acknowledge our portal's existence and keep sending us their materials, it is a good idea to notify them every time we publish an article about them. Through gradually building a community of sympathetic organizations, we can get them involved in other activities (providing materials for a calendar of events, online presentations, using some of our other services...). If it relieves our editorial workload, we can also try to teach them to get the information to us in a preferred format (sending it to a database through online forms).

Once we succeed in creating this community of contributors, our work to produce news is cut by half. If we know and trust the people sending us information, not only do we get the content we are interested in without having to search for it, but we are also spared the necessity of spending hours in determining its reliability.

2. Mailing lists as valuable sources of information for our news production

Great sources of new information about the activities of CSOs are mailing lists. These lists often prove to be the most preferred area where CSOs are willing to share their information, even if their other PR activities are poor. Portal editors should subscribe to the important lists relevant to the covered issues. If such communication platforms are missing in particular areas, we should act to initiate or even facilitate them. We are likely to be pleasantly surprised with the amount of interesting first hand information we receive when these lists start running.

3. Anonymous online suggestions

If we don't want to risk losing any valuable contributions, our portal should feature the online suggestions feature. However, for our news section, this is not likely to provide us with much content in publishable format that is neither copied from other sites, nor PR from political groups, nor the teachings of sectarian fanatics. Even contributions that have "*enough meat*" are likely to be very demanding on editing and confirming the reliability of information, and often more demanding than if we had researched and written a completely new article by ourselves. Either way, this function is likely to add to our workload since we will be forced to explain to most contributors why we turned their articles down.

b) Giving online space to CSOs

The most sustainable approach is to have other CSOs writing the news for us and publishing it directly on our portal. Few portals have achieved that while maintaining high quality and consistency of content: for CSOs, writing journalistic articles is usually too time consuming and expensive. In order to produce articles for our site, they must clearly see the direct benefit of having their story there. That is likely to happen when our site not only gets a high number of clicks, but it is also visited by the *right people*, whether these are donors, potential clients or partners. Examples of portals that implemented this model successfully are OneWorld and APC.

Of course, such a system can never work automatically. With greater diversity amongst contributors, the role of editor becomes more important. If we don't want the editor to have to re-write or reject the majority of articles, we should develop rules for the format as well as content of contributions (when there are types of content we know we don't want on our site). The stricter such rules are, the greater the chance we have of maintaining a consistent profile for our portal, but also with a proportionately larger number of contributions we have to reject. When the rules are too tight, we might lose out on information about genuine and inspiring activities that just weren't formatted in the manner we wanted.

When employing this news aggregation model, OneWorld confronted the following challenges:

1. Lack of coherency in destination-points for users.
2. Partner organization material does not fit "news" values.
3. Civil society in the south, whose voices we want to bring online, are constrained by a wide range of ICT issues.
4. This news aggregating approach can endanger the portal's journalistic values or integrity.

c) Content sharing

For some re-published members' news, APC uses a content sharing function of the open source content management system ActionApps. This and similar CMSs allow us to make use of news published by other organizations on their websites. For an editor, having access to new content via content sharing is the most comfortable way that exists.

Lately, several CSO projects emerged that are based on aggregating news from a group of participating organizations into one portal which functions as a collective amplifier for all those organizations' voices. *For more on consortium portal projects see [IV. Consortium portal projects](#) on page 14.*

d) Barter agreements

Cheaper than own news production is obtaining some of our articles through some kind of barter deals. Commonly, we can make a deal with other CSO portals allowing both sides to re-publish some articles from the other portal. However, if our partner portal has a similar profile to our own, instead of pure re-publishing we should search for ways to add some value to this duplicated information. That is easier when this kind of barter deal is made with printed media, as we can enrich articles with related links, background information, discussions, etc., that cannot be incorporated into printed documents. Crediting the author and source media, and publishing an active link to their website, is considered a rule for such content exchange agreements.

Unless it undermines our mission and principles, it is worthwhile to try to get similar agreements with major press agencies. While buying news on a regular basis is for most CSOs out of the question, there are examples of CSOs getting permission to re-publish for free specifically focused news produced by major national press agencies (e.g. Ekolist – Czech news portal on environmental issues, ChangeNet – Slovak APC member). At no cost, the agency can tick a “*job completed*” box in its sponsorship file, while we get access to news relevant to our focus, which often wouldn't have been attractive enough for major media to publish.

If we do produce in-house news, it can be similarly useful for our editors to try to achieve similar deals with press-monitoring agencies.

Copyrighting and copylefting our content

“... This made Rets a reference, and it's very common to find the content we publish reproduced in other websites and newsletters - Rits stimulates this reproductions, and we make it clear in our website that we defend copyleft policy. Also, we sometimes meet people in events carrying xeroxed copies of articles published in Rets, which are shared among different networks and reach people who don't have access to Internet. this makes our team really happy!!!” (Graciela Saleimen – Rits)

Each portal building must be preceded by an analysis that defines clearly what are the goals and target groups of our activity. This analysis becomes the primary blueprint for designing the portal and setting the rules for information management. As our main mission is often to draw maximum attention to specific civil society issues (getting the information to the greatest possible number of people, decision makers etc.) we should consider applying a full scale copyleft policy that by itself stimulates maximum dissemination of our information. This policy is still not widely accepted and applied by many subjects in the civil society information sector. Having worked all the hours there are on a tight budget to produce quality information, they consider it wrong to have their articles re-printed by others with no effort. However, defending a copyleft policy benefits our cause and it is

one of the tools through which we can stimulate mass media to pay attention to our stories. Consequently, open content policy can help us to get our content to people who are not online, which is a great bonus.

VII. Tips for making CSO portals sustainable

a) Keeping portal size reasonable

“The complexity of systems is not linear to their growth. Growing too big can lead (as it has happened so many times) to “death” of many projects...” (Carlos Alvarez - Red Wamani)

Seeing all the glittery comprehensive portals that are out there, we tend to think that our project must show similar complexity from the very beginning of its development. In fact, we are more likely to develop a successful portal if we build up its functionality gradually and work efficiently with feedback from users (or even their participation). That way, we are minimizing the risk of building a big site which is good-looking but bad in terms of functionality.

A balanced process of development is equally important when we are building a portal in cooperation with a group of other organizations. When we pay enough attention to consultation with partners, we ensure that the group retains interest in the project.

b) Audience-supported portal

In order to apply the audience-supported business model and ask users for direct support of our portal, several conditions must be met:

1. We must have built a strong community around our portal.
2. Community members must recognize the value of the work we do for them to such an extent that they are willing to pay money to keep receiving our services.
3. Our community must have the resources to support us.
4. Getting the financial support from the users to us is technically possible and simple.

The Canadian CSO portal *Rabble* found that the user community, when asked, provided necessary support to help the portal project keep rolling. Rabble even found the voluntary donation model more effective than forcing people to pay in order to get some of its services. In the US and Canada, a considerable proportion of community media (radio and TV stations) is directly supported by users. However, in most countries this experience is still missing and there are not many CSO internet projects where all the necessary conditions mentioned above are met. Where there has been no experience with direct community support, community members don't feel the linkage between our activities (performed somewhere out there in virtual hyperspace) and their own personal actions.

Even where these constraints are not the main issue, our community might simply not be able to support us. When our users are in financial hardship, they can hardly use the limited resources they have on our ICT project. That is the reality in many regions of Latin America, Africa and Asia, but also a number of regions in Europe. The successful application of the audience-supported model is therefore very much region-specific.

On the other hand, where this model is effective, it is relatively stable compared to other common sources of funding. When one reader stops donating, we still have others to turn to. They are not likely to turn away from us all at the same time, unless we make a fundamental error that ruins our profile.

c) Subscription model

“...To make a final user to pay for seeing an information... is a triumph” (Carlos Alvarez – Red Wamani)

As with the donation system, success with the subscription model is also highly region-specific. In the CSO context, applying this model must be considered carefully, even when we do produce content that people are willing to pay for. Part of our users' community might not be able to afford to pay and through a subscription system they would be excluded from access to our information.

Moreover, there are regions where people don't readily have access to credit card systems that enable online payments.

Again, we must consider whether this approach doesn't compromise our mission and whether the resources raised through subscriptions outweigh any disadvantages. Some online content producers (but also some hard copy magazine producers) responded to this challenge by differentiating between users who *can* most likely afford to subscribe, and the ones who *cannot* (the division line usually runs between "western" users and users from "developing countries"). However, this approach raises additional challenges:

1. Some users might find it discriminatory.
2. Given the international character of the internet (and free web-based dot-com e-mail services) it is problematic to differentiate between users according to their residence.
3. The digital divide doesn't only run between richer and poorer regions, but also within all societies.

d) Advertising model

Selling advertising space on our site is a strategy which in the CSO context rarely helps to cover much of the costs of running our portal. In general, these types of portals do not achieve large enough numbers of visitors to be interesting for important advertisers. Besides, a whole lot of companies might be out there whose promotion materials would not be acceptable for us. Firstly, by promoting them we might compromise our mission (e.g. an environmental CSO promoting a mining company). Secondly, our association with them could endanger our profile amongst donors.

e) E-commerce

The potential for the successful use of an e-commerce model is very much related to the kind of community we are addressing. For example, while this model can work well in a CSO environment in the case of established organizations in the US or the UK, there is almost no experience of it among CSOs in Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America and other regions.

"There is a big problem of logistics, which small organizations can hardly solve while maintaining sustainable costs. It's necessary to keep in mind that in our countries there is no tradition of purchasing at a distance or via mail, which makes it much more difficult to respond adequately to the need for the use of electronic commerce systems." (Carlos Alvarez – Red Wamani)

The possibility to successfully use an e-commerce model is limited regionally both in terms of our *portal's residence*, and the *regions where our users are based*:

1. The core of our user community might consist of people with low resources or people who are not "active users" of credit card systems. That is still the case in the majority of countries.
2. Equally, when we operate our portal in a country which is not one of "the rich ones", and we want to target e-commerce at foreign users, the high costs associated with product delivery can make the whole activity unprofitable. Moreover, online validation of commerce is limited to systems with many technical/legal requirements, which makes them virtually unavailable for most CSOs.

There might be also legal obstacles preventing us from developing an e-commerce system within our portal. In some countries, there is no legal framework for CSOs to become involved in commercial activities. When CSOs want to develop such activities, they are forced to establish a commercial company owned by the CSO.

For small CSOs, developing an infrastructure related to e-commerce might represent an investment that they cannot afford. However, it is possible to minimize such investments by using established online payment services that charge a percentage of every transaction they process. Examples of such services are the Pay Pal and Kagi systems.

Alternatives to online payments

As e-commerce via credit card payments is still not applicable in most countries, the CSOs that wish to generate part of their income by selling items online should look into alternative systems, which would be more realizable and profitable. For example, CSOs can overcome technical constraints if they don't use their portal for money transactions but only as a commerce mediator (channelling consultations, orders, registering orders and deliveries etc).

Resources

Association for Progressive Communications (APC):

<http://www.apc.org>

ActionApps content management system:

<http://www.apc.org/actionapps>

Examples of codes of ethics (editorial standards) for online publishing

OneWorld: <http://www.oneworld.net/article/view/32212/>

Societecivile: <http://societecivile.cd/node.php?id=958> (in French)

Examples of joint portal projects

Cidadania: <http://www.cidadania.org>

Healthy Environment for Kids: <http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca>

IFlwatchNet: <http://www.iflwatchnet.org>

ItrainOnline: <http://www.itrainonline.org>

Kormidlo: <http://www.kormidlo.cz>

SEE Regional Environmental Initiative: <http://www.see-environment.info>

Societecivile: <http://societecivile.cd>

Credits

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