Toward Nonprofit Organization Reform in the Voluntary Spirit: Lessons From the Internet

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This article identifies two models of nonprofit organization roles: the economic model, which emphasizes business-like methods, and the voluntary spirit model, which emphasizes participation and membership. Highly visible, professional nonprofit organizations must constantly struggle with the extent to which they are to emphasize their role as efficient and competitive economic actors or their role as institutions important to our democracy. After years of shifting toward the economic model, professional nonprofits may be ripe for reform. Simultaneously, they are confronting and engaging with the Internet. This article draws on examples of health-based citizen cyber-organizations to derive lessons for how professional nonprofit organizations can recapture their voluntary spirit generally and places an emphasis on participation and membership. Also derived are specific lessons on how professional nonprofits can use cyber-strategies to do so.

Keywords: Internet; participation; membership; nonprofit organization; reform

The nonprofit and voluntary sector encompasses both professional, paid-staff nonprofit organizations as well as a larger and more diverse population of smaller, informal groups and grassroots organizations (Smith, 2000; see also Smith, 1992; Smith, Seguin, & Collins, 1973).1 The professional, paid-staff nonprofit organizations occupy an ambiguous position in American society (Boris, 1999; Frumkin, 2002; Powell & Clemens, 1998; Salamon & Anheir, 1997; Van Til, 2000).2 Although they are not part of the private sector, they are expected to function in a highly competitive environment. Although not part of the public sector, they often attempt to deliver services to the neediest among us. Although they are not informal grassroots organizations, they are expected to serve as vital mediating institutions thereby enhancing and strengthening democracy. The ambiguity inherent in the position of these professional nonprofits has produced related tensions in how they approach their...
internal organization; missions, priorities, and activities; and acquisition and use of resources. Professional nonprofit organizations must constantly struggle with the extent to which they are to emphasize their role as efficient and competitive economic actors or their role as institutions important to democracy.

More than 10 years ago, in an important and prescient article, Richard Bush (1992) noted that nonprofits were increasingly adopting private sector orientations and techniques. Bush cautioned that one of the biggest challenges facing organizations in the sector was how to retain their “nonprofit spirit in a for profit world” (1992, p. 391). Bush feared that, by focusing on private sector methods, professional nonprofit organizations were underappreciating the value of participation and membership and thus undermining that which makes them distinct from other, particularly private sector, organizations. The years since Bush wrote have witnessed increased adoption of businesslike methods by professional nonprofits, and, at least in part as a result of this, the soul of the nonprofit sector seems to be up for grabs. Van Til (2000), for example, suggested that many professional nonprofits, owing to the fact that they look more like businesses than voluntary organizations, should be removed from the tax-exempt rolls altogether. Van Til (2000) urged, “A lean third sector, consisting only of organizations true to principles of voluntary citizen-driven service and advocacy, would merit both the public privileges and the reputation it must continue to earn” (p. 203).

The present moment thus constitutes an important opportunity for professional nonprofit organizations to confront their current role ambiguities and redefine, or recapture, their place in democratic society.

Below, we outline two models of nonprofit organization roles: the economic model and what we, drawing on O’Connell (1987; see also Bush, 1992), call the voluntary spirit model. As with all discussions incorporating different models, a caveat is in order: Here we present these models as clearly contrasting types, although in reality we must recognize that organizations exist on a continuum with features representing these models to varying degrees. Nonprofits oriented to the economic model are essentially economic actors seeking to efficiently and effectively raise funds and produce and deliver goods and services. Nonprofits oriented to the voluntary spirit model are democratic actors that emphasize participation and membership; that is, they function on the basis of a voluntary spirit.

As they simultaneously grapple with the issue of roles, professional nonprofits also are confronting and engaging with the Internet. The Internet can further either model. That is, nonprofits may use the Internet to enhance their economic role as effective fundraisers, competitors, and service providers, or they can harness the Internet to enhance participation and membership and thus their role as important voluntary organizations in a democracy.

The economic and voluntary spirit models posed here are congruent, although not completely interchangeable, with what Smith (2000) referred to as “bright matter” and “dark matter” nonprofit organizations. Bright matter
organizations are large, professional, highly visible nonprofits that stand in contrast to the larger and even more diverse population of smaller, more informal dark matter organizations such as grassroots associations (see also Smith, 1992). Both Smith’s model and the economic/voluntary spirit models may be used to suggest certain ideas. Most important for our purposes is that paid-staff nonprofit organizations seeking to restore their voluntary spirit through revitalizing participation and membership might look for lessons not in the private sector but, rather, in the nonprofit and voluntary sector among smaller, informal, less visible nonprofit organizations and grassroots associations. Professional nonprofits that seek to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the Internet in the furtherance of such reform efforts can derive specific strategies from citizen cyber-organizations in particular.

The next section outlines the two models of nonprofit roles. Following that, we draw on examples of disease- and disorder-based nonprofits to illustrate the differences in how professional nonprofits, oriented to the economic model, and nonprofessional citizen cyber-organizations, oriented to the voluntary spirit model, use the Internet. We argue that professional nonprofits might use the Internet to recapture their voluntary spirit and can learn important lessons on how to do so from more informal, nonprofessional, citizen cyber-organizations. We must recognize, of course, that there are possible limits to reform, which are in part predicated on differences between the organizational nature of the two types of groups; economic model nonprofits must always consider the relationship between their staff, who advocate and serve, and their constituency, for whom they serve and on whose behalf advocacy takes place. Conversely, with voluntary spirit-type organizations, advocates and constituents may be one and the same. Nevertheless, we think that professional nonprofits might learn some valuable lessons from the informal cyber-organizations. The conclusion highlights these lessons.

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION MODELS AND THE INTERNET

In describing organizations in the nonprofit sector, Van Til (2000) wrote,

In some cases, third-sector organizations seem like any other: fallible tools of human organization providing services that might as easily issue from a business corporation or a governmental agency. In others, particular organizations, individuals, and actions take on a more significant role in the working of society. (p. xv)

Leveraging Van Til’s distinction between nonprofit organizations that look like business firms and public agencies and those that serve important democratic purposes, we offer two models of nonprofit organization roles: the economic model and the voluntary spirit model. These models are based on the fundamental assumptions they embody about the nature of organizations
and individual motivations and how those assumptions manifest in their internal organization; their missions, priorities, and activities; and their acquisition and use of resources. These models are best thought of as the extreme ends of a continuum. In fact, nonprofits constantly struggle with and negotiate their particular role orientation, and therefore, individual organizations may periodically shift along this continuum as descriptions of the increasing business-like behavior of nonprofits suggest (Hall, 1992). Furthermore, the nonprofit sector is notoriously heterodox, and the two models simply describe two types of organizations. The distinctions between them are not always so clear in practice. Between these two extremes lie a plethora of nonprofits that draw from both models. Amnesty International, for example, draws from the economic model through its incorporation of organizational hierarchies and top-down processes yet also draws from the voluntary spirit model through its host of vibrant local chapters that, in no small part, take direction from members. Moreover, staff of nonprofit organizations oriented to the economic model work in the sector precisely because they want to express their own voluntary spirit. Nevertheless, we highlight the differences between these positions to establish the boundaries for potential reform. In short, nonprofit organizations can respond to the current crisis of role ambiguity by choosing to become better economic actors or by choosing to revive their voluntary spirit.

THE ECONOMIC MODEL

A basic assumption of the economic model is that all organizations, whether public, private, or nonprofit, are relatively similar, rational systems to which generic management principles can and should apply. It therefore implies that different kinds of organizations can learn from each other. Generally, this has meant that nonprofit organizations have learned from private sector firms, and the economic model thus envisions nonprofits as simply another type of business firm with a mission to respond efficiently to market failures and to demands for goods and services from the larger society and from specific populations (Gies, Ott, & Shafritz, 1990; Hansmann, 1987; Weisbrod, 1975). With regard to the management and day-to-day operations of nonprofits oriented to the economic model, such organizations focus on what Klausen (1995) referred to as the “growth philosophy,” the “all comprising capacity of the market mechanism,” and “organizational hierarchies, leadership, and top down processes” (p. 276).

The model also makes a basic assumption about individuals: that individuals are independent rational economic actors and, therefore, that they must be provided with certain kinds of incentives in exchange for their participation and support. Three basic types of incentives that organizations can offer include material incentives (including money, goods, and services), solidary (or social interaction) incentives, and purposive incentives (rewards stemming from participating in the pursuit of goals) (Wilson, 1995, pp. 33-35; see also Clark & Wilson, 1961; King & Walker, 1992; Knoke, 1988; Smith, 2000;
Organizations stressing the economic role typically attempt to emphasize material and purposive benefits rather than solidarity benefits. Thus, for example, the material perks that accrue to participants and members might include member-only newsletters, invitations to special events and fundraisers, and special offers. Similarly, purposive benefits might include a single overriding policy solution such as finding the cure for a health condition around which people have organized.

The shift of nonprofits toward the economic model, and the professionalization of the field (Anheir, 1990; Hall, 1992; Kotler & Andreason, 1987; C. McLaughlin, 1986), coincided with the publication of academic studies and nonprofit management handbooks applying the model to nonprofits (Connors, 1980; Drucker, 1990; Espy, 1986; Grayson & Tompkins, 1984; Hardy, 1972; Herman & Heimovics, 1991; Unterman & Davis, 1984; Young, 1984). The economic model typically manifests in the adoption of private sector techniques by emphasizing marketing and competition by nonprofit organizations. Organizations oriented to the economic model also often mimic the private sector by hiring hierarchically organized professional staff that determine the goals and activities of the organization and communicate them to the membership and external constituents.

The marketing and competition practices are most apparent in two primary and interlinked activities of the model: fundraising and the provision of services. As the search for funding becomes more competitive, nonprofits must increasingly differentiate themselves from their competitors. They can do this either by arguing that they are the most worthy cause among the many vying for funds (fundraising) or by providing any of a plethora of services and goods traditionally expected from public and private entities including case work, child care, provision of meeting and other public spaces, and community programming. In either case (and, in many cases, both practices are employed), the competition between groups for funds and contracts is stiff thereby necessitating an aggressive marketing strategy that may include advertising, press releases, and the employment of a marketing staff to carry it out. The content of such a strategy will have several predictably distinctive features. First, it will rely on the simultaneous claims that the problem is both devastating (which creates hopeless and miserable victims of those with the disease) and curable, if enough resources can be mustered to fight it. These claims set up a dynamic of competition between the groups to demonstrate that their cause is at once the most hopeless (complete with poster children) and the most hopeful (as shown by medical breakthroughs). Other elements include recruiting celebrities and creating distinctive fundraisers.

A nonprofit organization interested in using the Internet in the furtherance of the economic model could use its Web site in several ways. It could use its site to more efficiently deliver information about services provided to nonmembers thus, for example, making available on its site not only information about services offered but information about how to avail oneself of those services along with any forms needed by the service beneficiary. The organiza-
tion also could use its site to realize efficiencies in outreach to members and supporters thus using it essentially as a marketing and fundraising tool. Web sites might look like those of for-profit firms with slick and up-to-date advertising about all that the organization has to offer. They would also use it as a fundraising tool by promoting the image of the organization, advertising upcoming events, and offering the opportunity to securely donate online.

THE VOLUNTARY SPIRIT MODEL

As Van Til (2000) noted, “A weakness of the economic perspective . . . involves the underestimation of voluntary action. Much of what third-sector organizations do is not easily or appropriately valued in dollars” (pp. 27-28). Here Van Til is emphasizing the important democracy-serving functions of nonprofit organizations and, in doing so, highlights the idea that nonprofits are, or ought to be, essentially distinct from other kinds of organizations. What we call the voluntary spirit model thus begins with assumptions that are fundamentally different from those underlying the economic model. The voluntary spirit model, the name of which we adopt from O’Connell (1987), assumes that nonprofit organizations are not similar to other public or private organizations. Indeed, the voluntary spirit model, tracing its roots to Tocqueville (2000), views nonprofit organizations as occupying a unique and important role in our democracy. This role is best depicted as one in which the nonprofit serves as the appropriate forum, link, mechanism, and “structure of action” (Wood & Houghland, 1990, p. 103) through which individuals may “confront common problems and form relationships” (Bush, 1992, p. 394), practice “habits of the heart” (Bellah, 1985), and foster and enact “freedom, growth, and dignity . . . ; equal opportunity; justice; and mutual responsibility” (O’Connell, 1987, pp. 4-5). In sum, as Korten (1990) put it, nonprofit organizations may function as the “forums for the definition, testing, and propagation of ideas and values” (p. 98).

To the extent that the voluntary spirit model begins with the assumption that nonprofit, private and public organizations are not all alike, it also recognizes and lauds the diversity of principles upon which nonprofit organizations might be based. Although Bush (1992, p. 391) described religion as the foundational basis of most such organizations, this characterization obscures one of the most important philosophical divides that separates many organizations in the sector that orient themselves to the voluntary spirit model. Most religiously based organizations are, by definition, charity based, as are many secular nonprofits. Drawing inspiration from religious teachings that suggest we take a generous approach to those in need, such organizations promote the deservingness of those for whom they advocate and the need for individuals to donate time and resources to these deserving recipients. By contrast, there are numerous nonprofit organizations that take a rights-based approach to the question of advocacy for those in need. These organizations view the charity-based approach as potentially perilous in the sense that charity is always tied
to the perceived deservedness of the recipient and hence can be revoked at any

The voluntary spirit model also makes assumptions about individual
behavior and motivation that are different from those underlying the eco-
nomic model. The voluntary spirit model does not view people as individual-
istic and rational economic actors. Rather, it views them as public-spirited and
other regarding. Alternatively, even those who recognize a more individualis-
tic basis of society and more personalized motivations for nonprofit involve-
ment by individuals than communitarians (Etzioni, 1993) recognize motiva-
tions other than rational self-interest. Lichterman (1996), for example, argued
that people might be involved in nonprofit organizations out of a need for self-
fulfillment or the development and expression of one’s identity. Furthermore,
people might involve themselves in nonprofit organizations out of an impulse
for and drive for self- and mutual-empowerment. Thus, whereas nonprofit
organizations oriented to the economic model typically would attempt to pro-
vide primarily purposive and material incentives to supporters, nonprofit
organizations oriented to the voluntary spirit model typically would stress the
purposive and solidary benefits that would flow from participation, member-
ship, and support.

In recent years, at least in part as a response to the shift by many nonprofits
toward the economic model, scholars have begun advocating that nonprofit
organizations return to their voluntary spirit roots. This recent advocacy
stems from empirical research as well as from a normative and theoretical
basis. From an empirical perspective, Leat (1993) compared nonprofit andpri-
ivate sector organizations in the United Kingdom, and although she found that
they entail many similarities, she concluded that they also entail many differ-
ences. Similarly, after examining nonprofit organizations in Denmark,
Klausen (1995) argued that what he called the generic approach to organiza-
tional management (in which nonprofit organizations adopt private sector
orientations, tactics, and goals) may be both unnecessary and inappropriate.
From a more theoretical perspective, Knoke and Prensky (1984), after con-
ducting an extensive literature review, argued that generic organization theo-
ries simply do not fit nonprofit organizations. Finally, Bush (1992) adopted a
spirited normative approach and argued that nonprofit organizations must
dig themselves out of the “competition-based management approach” and
return to their “nonprofit spirit” (p. 391; see also Setterberg & Schulman, 1985;

Nonprofits seeking to reorient themselves to the voluntary spirit model
would attempt to reinvigorate their role as important participatory forums for
the debate, testing, and transmission of ideas and democratic values. They
would regard service beneficiaries as citizens instead of as, or in addition to,
customers. Furthermore, in addition to material and purposive benefits, they
would attempt to stress the sociability and mutual obligation aspects of organ-
zational involvement to members and supporters. Finally, they would reor-
ient their organizations to be important forums for the debate and enactment of
democratic values and ideas by, for example, opening up lines of continuous two-way communication and interaction between staff, members, supporters, and service beneficiaries.

Van Til (1990) argued that nonprofit organizations ought to “struggle bravely” (p. 278) to preserve altruism and solidarity. Similarly, Setterberg and Schulman (1985) suggested that nonprofit organizations must continue to offer a meaningful role for volunteers and find new ways to reward them. One can envision that use of the Internet might facilitate nonprofits in these attempts. Thus, for example, one can envision a nonprofit organization designing its Web site not simply to be a fundraising and advertising spot but, rather, to serve as a forum for interactive communication and debate between and among nonmember beneficiaries, members, and supporters and volunteers.6

EXAMPLES FROM CYBERSPACE

The specific examples that we draw on here include those derived from nonprofits organized around three different diseases and disorders: diethylstilbestrol (DES) exposure, the contraction of HIV from the blood supply by people with hemophilia, and muscular dystrophy. DES was a synthetic estrogen given to many pregnant women from the 1930s through the early 1970s to prevent miscarriages. In the 1970s, the drug was linked to infertility and gynecological cancers among the daughters of the women who were prescribed the drug (known as DES daughters). Hemophilia is caused by a deficiency of any of several blood proteins (clotting factors) that leads to uncontrolled bleeding and is now treated with the injection of the missing protein. HIV infection among people with hemophilia occurred in the early 1980s as a result of viral contamination of the clotting factor used to control bleeds coupled with inadequate responses by the blood products industry, various government agencies (such as the Food and Drug Administration), and nonprofit organizations (such as the American Red Cross). Finally, muscular dystrophy is a collection of 40 hereditary muscle-degenerating disorders.

In each of these cases, professional nonprofits advocate for patients. This model—professional staff advocating for a constituency—inherently separates these organizations from the voluntary spirit ones discussed later in this section, which have little or no separation between staff and constituency. Indeed, in the pure cyber-organizations, the two are entirely synonymous. The main nonprofits include DES Action (www.desaction.org), the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA; www.mdausa.org), and the National Hemophilia Foundation (NHF; www.hemophilia.org). Each is a formal nonprofit organization that maintains a national headquarters. Each has as its mission the furtherance of medical research to find a cure for the given disease or disorder or its effects. Each is hierarchically organized with a board of directors, management/staff, and volunteers. Finally, each has formal members/
supporters who typically join by donating money. Importantly, the degree of formal organization and hierarchy varies by group with DES Action being notably lower on the spectrum in this regard.

Despite the presence of these formal organizations, informal organizations developed or renewed themselves on the Internet. We call these cyber-organizations, because they exist only or primarily on the Internet and maintain relatively fewer, and in one case no, offline resources. The DES-related cyber-organization consists of a listserv originally formed by DES daughter Sally Keely (www.surrogacy.com/online_support/des) referred to here as the DES-L. The Hemophilia/HIV cyber-organization is the Committee of Ten Thousand (COTT; www.COTT.org), which maintained a significant Internet presence that included several affiliated listservs, an electronic bulletin board, and chat rooms. COTT is also emblematic of this type of organization in another important way; in contrast to the economic model organizations, in these informal groups, organizational maintenance for its own sake is less of an imperative, and the result may be rapid decline or even the end of a group. In the case of COTT, its work, and consequently its Internet presence, has declined precipitously in recent years following the death of the listserv host and achievement of several important purposive goals of the group. COTT still exists, but its activity both online and offline is a fraction of what it once was. With regard to muscular dystrophy, the Colorado Cross Disabilities Coalition (CCDC; www.colorado2.com/ccdc) is a particularly active example of a wide array of small cyber-organizations. Although CCDC is not entirely devoted to issues surrounding muscular dystrophy, people with muscular dystrophy are a crucial constituency and provide much of the leadership within the group. CCDC works to assure the full participation of people with disabilities in society, and many of its actions and programs are designed to create greater access to public spaces and resources for people with disabilities. Because CCDC’s constituency includes people with a variety of disabilities, its materials come in an array of forms, not all of which are online (such as audiotaped newsletters for the visually impaired). But it is clear that the Internet has been utilized to provide a cyber-presence through a very up-to-date Web site, weekly e-mail action alerts, electronic links to disability rights activists, and other tools. Just as the formal organizations vary in their degree of hierarchical structure, so do the cyber-organizations differ in the degree to which they are Internet based. The DES list described above represents an extreme in this regard in that it exists only online, whereas both COTT and CCDC maintain offline presences but clearly have made the elements of the Internet crucial to their means of operation.

These three groups share important features. In addition to their cyber-character detailed above, all of these groups remain primarily or entirely volunteer based. COTT and DES-L do not have formal memberships; CCDC encourages people to enroll as members not for financial reasons (membership is free) but as a way of committing to participate toward the achievement of the purposive activities of the group. Fundraising is explicitly not a major
goal of any of the organizations for two reasons. In the first place, these groups are able to operate in ways that require few resources for organizational maintenance (with DES-L again being the extreme case that requires only a listserv to exist). Additionally, their goals, which are primarily oriented toward providing a sense of community to their members and looking for concrete rights-based changes in public policy, tend to rely on voluntary actions of the membership.

In the discussion that follows, each of the traditional nonprofits (DES Action, the NHF, and the MDA) constitutes an example oriented to the economic model of nonprofit organizations, whereas each of the Internet-based organizations represents an example oriented to the voluntary spirit model. Although the Internet has not determined the particular role orientation of the different kinds of organizations (rather, these distinctions are grounded in and stem from the historical development of the field of health-based nonprofit organizations; Epstein, 1996; Starr, 1982), these role orientations are, indeed, replicated in the Internet presence of each kind of organization. In short, the traditional nonprofits oriented to the economic model use the Internet in the furtherance of their role as economic actors, whereas the cyber-organizations use the Internet in service to their role as democratic actors.

The next section demonstrates this through an exploration of factors differentiating the role orientations of the organizations (their internal organization; their missions, priorities, and activities; and their acquisition and use of resources). Furthermore, it discusses and provides examples of how the cyber-organizations use the Internet to maintain their voluntary spirit. As we argue, at this crucial moment, those professional nonprofits seeking to reorient themselves to the voluntary spirit model can avail themselves of significant lessons that attention to cyber-organizations has to offer.

INTERNAL ORGANIZATION

Whereas DES Action, MDA, and NHF are professional organizations with boards of directors, paid staff, and volunteers, the DES-L, CCDC, and COTT have little or no hierarchical structure. COTT does have a board of directors and has had a small staff during part of its history, but the board rarely meets and includes in spirit members who have died; neither the board nor the staff dictates the activities of the organization. The only authority figures that exist in these cyber-organizations are the moderators who, in theory, control electronic postings and may choose not to post a member’s specific message. In practice, however, this is rarely done. Rather, cyber-organizations are member-driven, horizontal, and organic organizations.

This, in turn, entails differences in their understanding of participation and membership. One may join DES Action, MDA, and NHF by sending in either dues or a donation. Those who choose to participate in ways that go beyond donating may volunteer, for example, or attend special events, conferences, and seminars. When participating in these activities, one nevertheless takes
direction from the organization’s hierarchy. Thus, for example, the nature of volunteer activities and norms, the dates and nature of special events, and the dates and agendas of conferences and seminars are predetermined by the organization without careful attention to the views of individual members.

This is manifested in their Web sites. DES Action and NHF, for example, provide limited means for electronic interaction between and among members/supporters, constituents and beneficiaries, and the organization (beyond the standard “contact us” button on their Web sites). NHF does have an electronic newsletter, but it is available only to those holding formal membership (which costs $50) and, in any case, is an example of simple, unidirectional communication—from the organization to the member. MDA offers an interactive component, but it is highly controlled by the organization. “MDAchat” allows members, those who donate, and other participants to launch and moderate bulletin board topics. The process for doing so, however, is highly structured: Anyone wishing to begin a topic or moderate one must fill out a formal application and submit it to MDA for approval. The application asks for personal identifying information (name, address, and so on) as well as for information about the proposed topic. Furthermore, once a chat session is approved by MDA, the chat itself is highly structured—that is, the chat session is scheduled for a specific time slot on a specific day thereby limiting the opportunity for interactive communication.

By contrast, the cyber-organizations manifest a different and broader understanding of participation and membership. Indeed, they are the same thing. The cyber-organizations require no dues, and because the nominal cost of server access is absorbed by the person who began the listserv or Web site, they do not require money and therefore do not engage in fundraising. Thus, people belong to these cyber-organizations not by virtue of having sent dues or donations but, rather, through their active participation. The fact that a single person can found and maintain a cyber-organization through listserv or Web site maintenance is both a strength and a weakness. On one hand, as noted above, it lowers opportunity costs of the entrepreneur precipitously. On the other hand, it renders the group potentially vulnerable to destruction if the single founder becomes incapacitated or disinterested. This is precisely the problem that occurred with the hemophilia list on the death of its founder, Michael Davon.

Participants do not take direction from the cyber-organization. Rather, they are the cyber-organization and create and debate organizational norms and routines. Thus, for example, members of the DES-L devised a process according to which e-mail postings are labeled according to subject area (F for fertility issues, C for cancer issues, and so on). Members developed this system as a way to help them distinguish posts they found relevant at any given moment from those they would find irrelevant.

Having established electronic norms, members continuously debate them. For example, DES-L members are prohibited from sharing the posts of others with anyone outside of the listserv. During the course of one listserv exchange,
a member accidentally revealed that she had shared a message outside the
group. Debate subsequently ensued about the violation, and appropriateness,
of the norm. Days later, the original poster acknowledged and took responsi-
bility for the violation of this norm. One of the listserv moderators partici-
pated in the debate but did so from the perspective of a member with her own
views on the matter.

The hemophilia list affiliated with COTT also hosted numerous disputes
about group norms, sometimes resulting in change but more often in reaffir-
mation of existing norms. One such debate revolved around what was consid-
ered within the scope of the list, whereas another attempted to determine
whether any religious or political views were so extreme as to be distracting
and/or cause other list members to leave the group. At one point, the list host
employed software that would take out both obscenities and religious symbols
(such as crosses representing crucifixes) from postings. Although this decision
was criticized by a few, most participants supported it, and the critics ultim-
ately chose to stay on the list.

Of course, not all such disputes result in amicable resolutions, and one dis-
advantage of the highly decentralized and democratic nature of the lists is that
members may become annoyed or angry by the tiresome (or tireless, depend-
ing on the participant’s vantage point) advocacy of some list members for a
certain point or norm. Nevertheless, the continuous renegotiation of norms,
whether it results in change, also serves to further mutual trust and commit-
ment in the group. As with a family or close social circle, people develop a
comfort level in knowing they can disagree without risking being dispelled
from the circle. They also feel validated when others write in to agree, and
even in cases of disagreement, they feel at least that they were heard.

Aspects of the Internet, particularly two-way communication forms such
as chat rooms, bulletin boards, and especially listservs, are an ideal way to fos-
ter the participatory model that voluntary spirit groups support. They create
the potential for a loose form of organization with a very low threshold of cost
for participants. People can easily and quickly become involved, and their
involvement can occur entirely according to their own schedules. However,
the Internet can also be used specifically to broaden control and hierarchical
structures over members and potential members as the experience of the eco-
nomic model groups tends to demonstrate. In this case, the Internet can
increase outreach to new and existing members, but the organization can con-
tinue to exercise control over these members by circumscribing the ways in
which they are able to participate as well as the information that it makes
available to them.

MISSIONS, PRIORITIES, AND ACTIVITIES

The major mission of DES Action, MDA, and NHF is to support research for
treatment and cures. Two foundation principles, reliance on charity as an
ideological approach and on experts (clinically and technologically defined)
as the most legitimate and key information source, support this orientation. These initial choices, as well as decisions about specific activities in pursuit of these goals, are typically set by organizational management and their boards and implemented by staff, and they are usually based on the requirements of the marketplace (recall the competition for deservedness) and embodied in mission statements. Membership in this context is not the same as participation in decision making about priorities and goals but, rather, entitles one to information about goals and priorities that have already been decided.

In this context, their Web sites serve as advertising and fundraising sites. The organizations use their sites to advertise cooperation with medical and research experts and with government agencies. NHF, for example, prominently features its Medical and Scientific Advisory Council, a group of scientists and clinicians upon whom it relies for information about treatment and research, whereas MDA invites visitors to “Ask the Expert” their medical questions. They also use their sites to make available clinical information about new drug trials, new treatment options, and in-progress scientific research. Having thus advertised themselves, the professional nonprofits also use their sites for fundraising. Those wishing to provide financial support may donate directly online (and, in the case of MDA, even watch the annual telethon online), pursue information related to long-term financial planning, or both.

By contrast, in the cases of the voluntary spirit nonprofits we examine, goals and activities are emergent from the membership, which creates the goals (although, as in the case of CCDC, there may be an existing stated mission), and members help to mobilize others around these goals. In this model, anyone can be a leader, and anyone can opt out of a particular activity. These organizations also tend to view the value of experts in decision making very differently than the economic model groups. Here, expertise derived from professional experience (such as being a medical professional or academic) is open to question, whereas expertise derived from living with or being affected by a given health condition is seen to offer a very valuable and credible qualification. This distinction also tends to democratize decision making, because members consider themselves capable of making decisions without having to defer to the ideas or direction of professional experts. Thus, in the voluntary spirit organizations, members are able to make decisions about goals, priorities, and directions collectively, and there is relatively little interference by either unaffected experts or individuals primarily concerned with organizational maintenance.

Another critical mission-related difference between the two types of organization stems from their view of missions with respect to time. Economic model organizations tend to have a much stronger future orientation than voluntary spirit organizations, which tend to focus more on the immediate and sometimes medium term. This crucial difference is derived from and reinforced by other differences between the organization types. Economic model nonprofits employ staff who, although likely motivated by and devoted to the
voluntary spirit, also of course have an interest in organizational maintenance. This, in turn, reinforces the tendency, already encouraged by the competition between organizations, to push for the cure—a long-term goal that is justified by medical breakthroughs along the way. This emphasis can occur at the expense of other goals, especially ones that deplete resources such as providing advocacy and resources for rights-based campaigns designed to ensure access and services for constituents more concerned with current challenges to living with conditions rather than the possibility of future cures. Voluntary spirit organizations, conversely, do not have constituencies but, rather, self-advocating members. These members often use their organizations as vehicles for mounting specific campaigns designed to accomplish short-term goals such as quickly providing compensation for members with a fatal disease (in the case of COTT); removing local barriers to jobs, public services, or transportation (as in the case of CCDC); or raising public awareness (as in the case of DES-L).

This difference in time orientation also means that voluntary spirit organizations may have more freedom and flexibility to capitalize on political opportunities. For example, one member of the DES-L read a newspaper article about the promising results of a study on the use of progesterone injections to prevent preterm births. To this DES daughter, the study, the product, and the hype in the news article sounded suspiciously like that surrounding the initial DES drug in the 1930s. The DES daughter immediately sent an e-mail to the listserv critiquing the news article, the quotes in the article attributed to researchers and medical professionals, and information about how to send letters to the editor of the newspaper. She encouraged others to send letters expressing caution about the new research findings. Days later, DES daughters began a similar campaign targeted at the March of Dimes, which was quoted in the original news article as in favor of the new method of preventing premature delivery.

This difference between reliance on experts versus the membership for direction and decision making is another area with important implications. First, in the absence of experts, some false information might circulate through the cyber-organization for a time (although it is usually corrected by other members). Furthermore, although reliance on the membership for direction means that these cyber-organizations spend much of their time debating the relative merits of specific goals, activities, and tactics, the decisions ultimately reached usually are much more likely to be reflective of the ideas of the cyber-members and participants. Finally, to varying degrees, the memberships of the voluntary spirit organizations came together specifically because of a distrust of professionals. This was particularly pronounced within COTT because of the tragic history of hemophiliacs in the 1980s, many of whom were infected with HIV by clotting factor products prescribed by their doctors and endorsed by the NHF (Resnick, 1999; Siplon, 2002). But it was also true for the DES-L, which was founded by a woman unconvinced she had received the best medical advice from doctors, and for CCDC, which rejects attempts by
medical experts to pathologize disability. These organizations instead seek to offer the opportunity for members to provide peer advice and counseling to one another derived from their lived experiences.

The Internet can be used for both the top-down approach employed by the economic model organizations and the horizontal participatory approach used by the voluntary spirit groups. In the first case, economic model groups choose to use the Internet, primarily through Web site development as a tool to extend their presence. A Web site can become a place where the organization can be showcased, the case can be made for why this cause is deserving, and the opportunity to donate money are all contained together. The voluntary spirit groups may also start with a Web site as the place where the organization can be showcased, but the purpose of the showcasing is likely to be to alert people to the fact that they can take a more participatory role around this issue—by participating in political action, accessing information to become stronger self-advocates, or joining a virtual community via listservs, chat rooms, and bulletin boards to decide for themselves how they want to react, individually and collectively, to the group’s issue.

ACQUISITION AND USE OF RESOURCES

The nonprofits oriented to the economic model see their primary resources as information, provided by experts, and money. This can have the effect of making members and volunteers seem like a secondary resource. Certainly, members and volunteers are important but often as vehicles for making money (through donations) and stretching it (through volunteerism) rather than as a source of goals and directions (which instead have been provided by a combination of market forces, expert opinions, and paid staff). They therefore emphasize charity, and fundraising may become a de facto primary goal, which displaces other goals. If one goes to the NHF Web site, for example, one is greeted with a pop-up page in front of the home page boldly announcing, “It’s Time for a Cure,” and laying out its plan to raise $10 million in 5 years. Thus, the resource of money is needed in the economic model for two purposes: in furtherance of long-term missions (like research for a cure) and organizational maintenance including salaries of hierarchically arranged staff and infrastructure such as office space for the organization.

The organizations we examine oriented to the voluntary spirit model see their primary resource as their membership—and the interactions within it. The interactions themselves become valuable for the sense of solidarity they engender, the sense of mutual obligation that pushes people to contribute to the attainment of purposive goals, and the information sharing they facilitate. Because money is seen as a less important resource to begin with and because there is a strong sense of shared destiny, it is less likely that goals arrived upon by the group will be displaced by the quest for financial resources. In the rare cases when these groups do call for money within the membership, it is usually for a clear, short-term project, and often fundraising occurs by members
donating and announcing their actions to spur other members to action. This occurred, for instance, when COTT called for rapid donations for an ad campaign targeting newspapers in the Washington, D.C., area during a push for a compensation bill for HIV-positive hemophiliacs.

LESSONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Over the past few decades, the professional nonprofit organizations have learned a great deal from private sector firms and have adopted private sector techniques. Thus, we have witnessed the rise of strategic marketing and advertising by nonprofit organizations, which have also become vigorous competitors in the marketplace. Although the adoption of private sector techniques has held certain benefits (such as growth and efficiency) for nonprofit organizations, if carried too far for too long, nonprofits may lose their spirit, diminish the value of participation and membership, and thereby become indistinct from private sector firms. In doing so, nonprofit organizations would be abdicating their role as institutions important to democracy. We believe that the present period—in which academics and members of the nonprofit community are focusing attention on the roles of organizations within the sector—constitutes an important opportunity for reform. Simultaneously, nonprofit organizations are confronting the Internet, which can serve as an important tool in their reform.

We have outlined two models of nonprofit organization roles: the economic model, in which nonprofit organizations are essentially economic actors oriented to fundraising, the efficient delivery of outputs, and the pursuit of tangible goal outcomes, and what we have called the voluntary spirit model, in which nonprofit organizations act as important structures linking citizens, through participation and membership, in democratic forums. Organizations oriented to these different models also differ significantly in the values they emphasize with economic model organizations emphasizing efficiency and output over the inclusive debate and democratic process valued by voluntary spirit organizations. The major aspects of these models are summarized in Table 1. In the present period, professional nonprofits can continue to emphasize their role along the lines of the economic model—in which case they would continue to seek to become better economic actors. Alternatively, they can pursue reform along the lines of the voluntary spirit model—in which case they would seek to become stronger forums for linking citizens with others. The Internet can further either choice.

To, as Bush (1992) put it, retain their nonprofit spirit in a for-profit world, professional nonprofits can learn—from the collection of smaller, nonprofessional, and less visible organizations that make up a significant portion of the larger nonprofit and voluntary sector—how to restore the principles of membership and participation generally. For example, professional nonprofits can consider working to facilitate more, and more meaningful, participation by
members and donors that extends beyond the act of donating. They also might consider ways in which they could provide more of a voice to members and activists in determining organizational activities. Finally, they could consider fostering mutual support and solidarity among their constituencies that later could be leveraged in pursuit of organizational goals. More specifically, professional nonprofits can look to the host of citizen cyber-organizations that exist only or primarily on the Internet for lessons on how to use cyber-strategies to further their work toward an emphasis on participation, membership, and voluntary spirit.

The citizen cyber-organizations analyzed here offer several important practical lessons for nonprofit organizations looking to thus reorient themselves. With regard to internal organization, these citizen cyber-organizations are more democratic, foster solidary commitment among the members, and are less likely to experience goal displacement. Because these cyber-organizations exist primarily on the Internet and therefore consist rather entirely of communication between and among their members, they derive energy and direction from their members in a bottom-up rather than in a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumptions</th>
<th>Economic Model</th>
<th>Voluntary Spirit Model</th>
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| All organizations are more or less alike | All organizations are not alike
| Individuals are rational | Nonprofits occupy an important place in a democracy
| Individuals are motivated by mutual obligation, personal fulfillment, and self-empowerment |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal organization</th>
<th>Economic Model</th>
<th>Voluntary Spirit Model</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structured, hierarchical</td>
<td>Little or no formal structure</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Membership through dues</td>
<td>Membership through participation</td>
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<tr>
<th>Missions, priorities, and activities</th>
<th>Economic Model</th>
<th>Voluntary Spirit Model</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missions are future-oriented and derived by staff/board</td>
<td>Missions are often short or medium term and derived by membership</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Major incentives: material and purposive</td>
<td>Major incentives: solidary and purposive</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Activities controlled from above</td>
<td>Activities controlled by membership</td>
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<tr>
<th>Acquisition and use of resources</th>
<th>Economic Model</th>
<th>Voluntary Spirit Model</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private sector techniques: Marketing</td>
<td>Participatory techniques: Mutual support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Community-based mobilization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td>Reliance on volunteerism</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Resources used for: Long-term purposive goals (e.g., research)</td>
<td>Resources used for: Short-term purposive goals</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizational maintenance</td>
<td>Increased quality of life of membership</td>
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<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Economic Model</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Debate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Provision of outputs</td>
<td>Democratic process</td>
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hierarchical, top-down manner. The members constitute the organizations through their interactions. They debate the norms of the organizations and the informal ground rules for participation, which may change as the members deem necessary and appropriate. The general goals that the cyber-organizations adopt, and the specific activities they undertake in pursuit of those goals, are emergent from the membership rather than given by the organizational leadership. Through their communication, they foster solidary commitments between and among the members and the organization they constitute. In fact, developing this solidary commitment is what these cyber-organizations excel at. Continuously establishing the solidary commitments between and among members is the key resource that they leverage as they seek to undertake their activities.

Continuous communication also serves as a protection against mission and goal displacement among the leadership of an organization. With continuous communication, it is still possible that missions, priorities, and activities can change, but that will be at the initiative and with the consensus of the group rather than because of decisions thrust on a constituency from above. The issue, however, is not only that solidary commitment and continuous communication are fungible resources that can be used in the furtherance of group goals—although they are. Equally important is that solidary commitment, and the interaction that creates it, are valuable in themselves and highly prized by the membership of voluntary spirit organizations.

As the professional nonprofits confront the Internet, they can also benefit from several specific, concrete cyber-strategies aimed at revitalizing the principles of membership and participation suggested by the successful experiences of the citizen cyber-organizations discussed here. First, professional nonprofits might consider using their Web sites for more than advertising and fundraising. That is, they should consider using their sites to foster communication between and among members, volunteers, supporters, and service recipients to foster solidary commitment. This would entail going beyond the simple “contact us” button found on most Web sites and unidirectional communication from the organization to the members, supporters, and service recipients entailed in the electronic delivery of newsletters and announcements. Rather, the nonprofit organizations could use listservs, bulletin boards, and chat rooms to foster multidirectional communication—interpersonal interaction. This may also entail toning down their charity messages, which play well to a potential donor public but are disempowering, and in some cases irritating, to constituent groups.

Second, having established a forum for multidirectional communication, the professional nonprofits could allow the participants—members, volunteers, service recipients, and supporters—to set the terms for participation in the electronic forums. That is, nonprofits should resist the natural urge to control the process and content of communication. With regard to the process of communication and interaction, participants will develop norms of electronic participation by and among themselves. These will emerge over time and will
be subject to change as the participants deem appropriate. Indeed, participants will likely spend a good deal of time debating and arguing over those norms. In the voluntary spirit organizations we analyze here, the ability to create key aspects of the organization also gives members a sense of ownership over the group's work that, in turn, becomes an important resource for creating and carrying out activities.

Third, and related to allowing the participants to develop their own norms of participation, nonprofits should resist the temptation to supervise, control, or direct the content of the electronic conversation. This may mean confronting criticism, because it should be remembered that at least some of the voluntary spirit organizations were founded in part because of distrust or disagreement with the economic model organizations. But, as the experience of the voluntary spirit cases illustrates, the ability to disagree and reach new understandings actually serves to create stronger relationships within the membership of the group.

None of this is to suggest that economic model organizations must entirely abandon their missions, which, after all, accomplish a number of laudable goals such as the mobilization of significant resources from the general population for research and other important long-term activities. However, as the MDA/CCDC example particularly illustrates, it is critical that the constituencies of economic model organizations at least have a voice in the formation and evolution of the content of such missions. Otherwise, as demonstrated above, professional nonprofit organizations risk that their constituents will take advantage of the low costs and ease of use associated with the Internet to break away and start their own voluntary spirit organizations. We also recognize that there may be limits to the degree of change that economic model organizations can sustain; clearly a professional nonprofit that reports to a board of directors; maintains a Washington, D.C., lobbying presence; and is responsible for a multimillion dollar budget cannot manage itself like a cyber-organization. Nevertheless, there is anecdotal evidence that some change along these lines is already occurring, such as a recent campaign by the American Cancer Society that seeks to provide the opportunity for online interaction between long-term cancer survivors and people in early stages. Clearly, more research is warranted on how far professional nonprofits can reform themselves.

At base, the nonprofits oriented to the voluntary spirit model studied here have developed a different form of efficiency—one that allows a high level of participation and activity and yields worthwhile benefits to members but requires very small amounts of financial resources. They are able to do this by valuing social relationships among constituents, both as a tool to be converted into resources and as a primary benefit to be derived from associational activity. These relationships are constituted on the Internet. By adopting some lessons from the cyber-organizations studied here and by facilitating the high level of participation and communication afforded by two-way interactivity,
professional nonprofits may be able to use the Internet to revitalize their voluntary spirit.

Notes

1. Van Til (2000) provided a useful description of different kinds of maps commonly used to situate and describe the nonprofit sector.

2. The articles collected in a recent issue of Public Administration and Development, “Government-Nonprofit Relations in Comparative Perspective,” edited by Derick W. Brinkerhoff and Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, (2002), also capture the tensions confronted by nonprofit organizations, both in the United States and abroad.

3. As professional nonprofit organizations have oriented themselves to private sector techniques, there also is some evidence that they have experienced a decline in citizen trust and public confidence, particularly as a wave of questionable actions on their part has come to light. For example, the National Capital Chapter of the United Way experienced financial irregularities, Pallotta Team Works (promoter of the AIDS Ride) folded after being accused of extravagant spending, and the public reacted loudly when the American Red Cross attempted use funds derived from post-September 11, 2001, donations for other causes. In light of these scandals, according to Light (2002), the percentage of people who report no confidence in nonprofit organizations has doubled (to 16%) since July 2001. Light not only reviewed the results of a Brookings Institution survey on trust and commitment to charitable nonprofit organizations but also reviewed a series of surveys by other organizations on the issue. Similarly, the United Way’s National Capital chapter has reported cuts in its workforce by 40% in light of plummeting donations (Salmon, 2002, 2003; Salmon & Cho, 2002). In light of these alleged failures of the economic model and in an attempt to encourage nonprofit reform, INDEPENDENT SECTOR seems to be encouraging nonprofits to shift further to the economic model (see INDEPENDENT SECTOR, 2002).

4. Previous studies of the use of the Internet by private sector firms and public sector agencies suggest that the Internet may be a means of organizational reform by allowing firms and agencies to better reach stakeholders, convey messages to the public, and broaden support for what they do. For private sector examples, see Mowshowitz (1986, 1994) and Davidow and Malone (1992). For public sector examples, see Stanley, Weare, and Musso (2002). A recent literature review from the nonprofit field (Spencer, 2002) suggests that nonprofit organizations are generally using the Internet simply to do what they always do. In the pages that follow, we show by way of example that the Internet can be one means for nonprofit organization reform.

5. Van Til (2000, pp. 87-91) provided a compelling description of how the nexus of fundraising and service provision may result in a loss of voluntary spirit.

6. The literature on netiquette is extensive, and a full review of it here would distract from the main objective of this study. Nevertheless, readers interested in this issue are directed to Rheingold (1993) and M. McLaughlin, Osborne, and Ellison (1997) who documented examples of the effective use of netiquette in the service of virtual communities and to the work of Kollock and Smith (1999) who suggested that responses to online etiquette in the furtherance of virtual communities result in either online anarchy or online dictatorship.

7. There is necessarily a selection bias at work here. By choosing these three cyber-organizations, we do not account for those that die. In part, this is because of the nature of the online environment. When cyber-organizations die, they simply wither away, often leaving no trace. The page is simply removed from the server. Other dead cyber-organizations simply appear as stagnant or outdated links thereby providing little if any evidence as to why the organization stagnated or failed. More important, however, we argue that it is precisely the success of the cyber-organizations studied here that warrants their consideration as exemplary organizations from which traditional nonprofits can learn.
8. The next section is based on data gathered previously by the authors for a different research question (Brainard & Siplon, 2002). The data were collected by author monitoring and observation of (but not participation in) the electronic resources of the various cyber-organizations. In exchange for permission to observe, the authors agreed not to publish dates, names, or direct quotations. Rather, what follows simply relates the nature and general topics of discussion.

References


Lessons From the Internet


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