
THE WEB AND INDIVIDUAL PHILANTHROPIC EMPOWERMENT

Gus diZerega

One of today's most important philanthropic issues is the need to empower hundreds of millions of non-wealthy members of society to make more focused and effective contributions to American life. Historically philanthropy has been regarded as primarily a responsibility of the well-to-do, with most other charities originating in the churches, and thus it has largely been addressed in terms of private (donor intent) or religious values. Modern circumstances, however, encourage a different perspective.

Philanthropy deals with values that donors believe would benefit society but will not be adequately expressed within traditional private institutions rooted in business relationships. Such values differ from consumer goods because market demand is not a measure of their desirability. Values such as these have been called "public values" and as such have often been considered a proper goal for political provision. Political provision has not been the sole way to provide such public values, however, especially in the United States, where philanthropy has traditionally been civil society's alternative to providing public values through government.

Churches' Influence Declining

Although much of American philanthropy has had roots in religious practice, changes are transpiring in American society that will impact long-range philanthropic trends. For some time church attendance has been declining. Regular church attendance probably numbers approximately 20 to 25 percent of the population, and oft-cited higher figures that do not match up with other data are still substantially less than a majority (Robinson 2007). Nor has the current recession led to an increase in attendance (Pew Forum 2009). Churches have traditionally been the major vehicle for community philanthropy at the popular level, perhaps because they diminish organizing costs, provide a context encouraging people to enlarge their sense of ethical concerns, and increase a sense

of a concrete community of effort. If churches no longer bring large number of people together in a context encouraging voluntary philanthropy, what might be the alternative? Is a turn to government the only answer?

I am assuming, based on substantial experience, that even if church structures continue to decline in social influence, American citizens will remain open to arguing for and effectively seeking to realize public values outside of governmental channels. The habits of association have become deeply ingrained. Nevertheless, effective organization will require the development of new means of collaboration that are easy to use. Organizing costs for new philanthropic enterprises can be high, as scattered populations of interest seek to find one another and then act together to achieve common goals. If they do not find effective nongovernmental means, would-be social entrepreneurs and community activists are likely to seek to realize these values within government, as has often been the case.

But there is a problem. Government efforts to provide philanthropic public values have a substantial history of being appropriated by private interests, entangled by bureaucratic power, constrained by a refusal to consider new findings, and plagued by simple corruption, while serving as sources for resentment by people forced to pay for values they do not share. But despite the many weaknesses in reliance on government provision, government has traditionally possessed one powerful strength: by creating a centralized point for decision-making, it lowers transaction costs in cases where people sharing similar priorities are scattered and disorganized.

Technology Providing Solutions

Fortunately, important contemporary developments are redrawing the lines between the public values government is best at providing and those that can be achieved better within civil society. The Internet has greatly reduced the cost for citizens to communicate easily with one another. The development of the World Wide Web has already enabled many people to more easily find causes they want to support and to fine-tune their giving. I used the Web to donate to musicians in New Orleans after Katrina and to Paul Farmer's "Partners in Health" after the Haitian earthquake. When different groups seek my support for broadly similar activities, I use Charity Navigator to help ensure my dollars are well-utilized. I could not have done any of this before the advent of the Internet. Instead, I would have had to donate to large umbrella organizations and trusted them to reflect my

priorities. Exposés of United Way salary scandals have demonstrated, however, that such trust in these large charities is not always warranted. In addition, I have used my own blog, now on Beliefnet (<http://blog.beliefnet.com/apagansblog/>), to inform my readers of sources for effective giving.

Through their online donations, people of modest means have enriched giving particularly at the community level, and the internet has provided a tool by which people can reach others with common interests without relying on traditional NGOs or corporations. In short, particularly with enforced net neutrality, the web has become one of the most important developments in our time for enhancing the growth of networks within civil society. It enriches philanthropic possibilities immensely by dramatically lowering organizing costs.

As the web continues to develop, there will be increasing opportunities for people to create and fund activities that we have often looked toward government to accomplish. If many of these tasks can be performed by civil society, they will be accomplished with less divisiveness and often greater effectiveness as well.

In the following sections I outline two very different examples of the kinds of cooperation the web makes possible.

Improving Parks through Web Communication

Government has been reasonably effective at setting aside and protecting public lands valued by millions of people. It has been far less competent at managing them. This observation holds for both state and national parks. Poorly funded when times are good, they are starved and closed when times are bad. Although public parks remain very popular, their popularity does not always give them political leverage: few political races are won or lost based on a candidate's treatment of parks. Thus the government-based model of park management turns out to be mediocre at best.

Fortunately, a far more finely tuned interaction between people and nature is now possible. The rapid increase in land trusts and their frequent cooperation with state parks suggests a different institutional framework for these important public values. Land trusts provide some, but not all, of the amenities that parks provide, but they provide superior administration. The web makes it possible for democratic public trusts to be easily organized for administering parks. Interested citizen members can oversee developments in particular parks, communicate with one another, and monitor the performance of park administrators. Such land

trusts can also help overcome temporary financial difficulties through the creation of endowments.

Something close to this already exists in Great Britain, with the National Trust of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, but in the vast territory of the United States a far more finely tuned membership would be necessary to provide good oversight. The web makes this kind of relatively small-scale oversight by a scattered population economical and efficient.

Creating Community Bulletin Boards

Sonoma and Marin Counties in California have what we call the WACCO List (<http://www.waccobb.net/forums/index.php>). WACCO provides a means by which anyone can easily find others with goods or services to sell or give away, offer classes, discuss local issues, or do anything else someone might think of to cooperate with others in the area. It makes it possible to find similarly interested individuals even when they number only a small part of a community of hundreds of thousands. And it is used. In a sense it is a clearinghouse for cooperative projects within these two counties.

Such community bulletin boards exist in other computer-savvy parts of the United States and are growing in number. If every county and large city had such lists, the social network of cooperative relations would be powerfully strengthened. Citizens would have the opportunity to engage in or observe more-focused discussions of local issues, with an immediacy and openness impossible for newspapers and traditional print media. Questions are asked, and knowledgeable readers offer answers. Regular users develop a community of trust, increasing the ease with which a population can respond to new crises or opportunities. For example, organizing a benefit for people who had lost their home in a fire, which I oversaw some years ago, would be much easier. A community's capacity for self-governance would be far stronger.

A New Era of Voluntary Association

The web makes it possible for widely scattered but committed people of modest means to cooperate with one another in providing values they believe to be good for society as a whole but which are inadequately provided at present. People who have good ideas for improving life in their communities have sometimes been slow to act because organizing costs have been prohibitively high

compared to the resources each individual is able to contribute. This is why in many cases social entrepreneurs and community groups seek political funding despite its drawbacks. But as the internet has reduced the distance among people, it has lowered the costs of organizing, with the result that we could be on the leading edge of a new era of vibrant voluntary association.

The web is essentially as radical a change from what went before it as the printing press, radio, and television were in their time. These media transformed their societies. The web differs from those older media in at least one very important respect: it provides access to everyone. I need not own a printing press, radio station, or television studio—or convince someone who does—in order to publish my views or communicate with people I do not know personally. By eliminating this kind of middle man, the web empowers average citizens as no media innovation has before. Philanthropy in the broadest sense will be the beneficiary.

As a general principle, it may be that an effective philanthropic network on the Web could replace a wide range of political provisions of public values. Particularly well-suited for such provision are those values of which many approve but which relatively few actively use and some will not use at all. Philanthropy has many exciting growth opportunities in this area, and a challenge for philanthropy in the coming decade will be to promote the widest possible access to computing tools, technologies, and techniques of association that can be used to magnify and realize public values.

REFERENCES

- Robinson, B. A. 2007. “How many North Americans attend religious services (and how many lie about going)?” http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_rate.htm.
- The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. 2009. “Is a Bad Economy Good for Church Attendance?” <http://www.pewforum.org/Religious-Attendance/Is-a-Bad-Economy-Good-for-Church-Attendance.aspx>.