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New Media: What can they deliver?

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New media form a growing and important body of resources for community groups and advocates. Some ways to use new media are cheap, fast and effective while others are labour-intensive, expensive and time consuming. So you need to be able to make well informed decisions about what you want to achieve, who your audience is and how they will be looking for your information. Then you need to choose appropriate technologies for your needs. Just like plumbing and other sorts of health hardware, or like office equipment or anything else, if its not appropriate it's not worth your scarce resources.

In this talk I'll discuss some widely different community or campaign uses of digital media, mostly internet based but not all. Then I'll suggest some of the lessons which can be drawn by advocacy workers today.

First: two examples of well known internet advocacy campaigns:

The Zapatistas movement, 1994-1997 and the campaign against the MAI [1999]. Key elements here were rapid communication but also the ability to archive and make information accessible worldwide.

Then a current example:

the Middle East see two websites:

Gush Shalom

site of one organisation in the Israeli Peace movement

at <http://www.gush-shalom.org/english/>

The Palestine Monitor: the voice of civil society

at <http://www.palestinemonitor.org/>

This is the Palestinian Non-Governmental Network (PNGO) set up by ngos in Palestine, and support groups in Europe and the US.

Linking valuable archives with discussion lists:

eg Gush Shalom discussion list links to the web archive at site. For example, ongoing items about the court cases and sentences of the 'refusniks', the 1094 Israeli servicepeople or reservists who refuse to serve in the occupied territories. The discussion list informs of day by day news, but the site archives these reports, so you can track back. Example 2: the Olive Harvest: not just a text archive of day to day events, but images which tell story so graphically. Example 3: the wall being built: scale best described in images, etc, etc.....

Need plain, readily navigable and readily **updatable** sites

Online campaign managers: *note* MoveOn site: www.Moveon.org

The invisible web – people to people:

the key to rapid information circulation? Not only the 'discussion list' with established mailing list, and link to an archive, but the informal, person to person web of people passing items around the world. The internet demonstrates the paradox that this extraordinarily high tech media is most effective when it is based on word-of-mouth, personal contacts which may be sustained and even initiated digitally, but which demonstrate a real human interaction. People, not technologies, are at the heart of effective digital advocacy.

A final example:

Collarenebri Aboriginal Community heritage project:
slower, not so flash, but this project tells us about appropriate technology.

Cautions:

New media are still just media: there are no guarantees of democratisation or of access for all. We need to recognise the controls and interventions by transnational corporations and by nation states, as well as gender, class, culture and literacy biases. But the rapidly developing and unpredictable technologies and uses of digital new media mean that control is only ever partial, there are always cracks to identify and exploit.

Skills development for your community or organisation:

* Focus first on low cost, readily accessible and user friendly forms like email.

* Learn how to set up a discussion list and assess realistically how much labour this will take to maintain.

* Learn how to search the web to find the sites and organisations relevant to you, your constituents and the people you want to reach. Hook up, subscribe, participate in discussion lists and information sharing, write to people and make connections.

* If you want to move into a website to establish your organisation's profile, to archive information about your issues and campaigns and to organise meetings and conferences, get advice about how to create a site which:

- (a) does what **you** want it to do: make a list of your goals. Then decide the best approach to achieving them. The solutions for you may NOT be the web!
- (b) is graphic effective but NOT graphic heavy. This will make it less expensive to design and faster to load, as well as quicker to alter and update.
- (c) is low maintenance and easy to update
- (d) THEN plan maintenance and skill transfer. How will this site be maintained? Who will do it? What are the skills necessary to do what you want? Html editing and uploading? Online database? Do you have a person? A budget? How can you upgrade your staff- and constituent-skills so they can take over the maintenance and updating of your site?

Concluding note:

The most effective use of the web by most people so far is the cheapest and quickest, that is: email. So skill transfer and enhancement among your members in both email and in discussion list participation, as well as in web research, will deliver a great deal of what you want, which is generally: empowerment.