

# CHAPTER FIVE | NONPROFIT TECHNOLOGY ACCESS

## INTRODUCTION

**N**onprofits are subject to a specific set of relations based on their own goals and place in greater society. As a result, nonprofits are often relegated to a different set of restrictions when confronted with the need for greater technological access and understanding. This chapter will outline major factors that prevent access to technology for nonprofits; perceptions on nonprofit technology use by both nonprofits and web designers; and a discussion on where expectations in a resource-constrained environment can be balanced with the help of design ethnography and Wordpress.

## DEFINITION OF A NONPROFIT

For the purpose of this thesis, I will consider a “nonprofit” to be an umbrella term encompassing not-for-profit organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community organizations, third sector groups, charities, community interest companies (CICs), and generally all legally-recognized organizations whose earnings are not redirected toward their shareholders, but to pursue the achievement of their organization’s goals.

It should be noted that the nonprofits I will be discussing are all located in London, and therefore my experiences and research are limited to organizations functioning in this location. More narrowly, the nonprofits both would be considered small scale organizations, as they are run entirely on volunteers or freelance staff. As a result, recommendations made for nonprofits are directed toward organizations with a small to medium sized staff and circumstances that require self-sufficient technology use.

## OFFICIAL STATUS FOR NONPROFITS PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH

**Druid Cycles** (<http://druidcycles.co.uk/>) is an independent *community interest company* (CIC) which is officially defined as:

...a new type of limited company designed specifically for those wishing to operate for the benefit of the community rather than for the benefit of the owners of the company. This means that a CIC cannot be formed or used solely for the personal gain of a particular person, or group of people. [CIC Regulator 2010]



The Druid Cycles Guild

Druid Cycles' mission is to play a role in the protection of the environment through greater promotion of cycling and sustainable maintenance practices and the exchange of community support, knowledge, and materials. Their main contribution as a CIC is through sponsorship of cyclists who also serve as community ambassadors and by providing low cost, sliding scale, or exchange-based bike repair to individuals and other community organizations.

For this particular nonprofit, my role was to help decipher how the current website could be improved and in what way it could be better integrated into

their organization. There was no graphic design involved, simply content writing and photography.

**Pedal Power Cycling Club (<http://www.pedalpowercc.org/>)** is a community organization affiliated with the Hackney borough cyclists group. It is both part of, and run in accordance with, the greater goals of the London Cycling Campaign, (itself a registered charity). A charity in England is then defined as:

... [O]rganisations that benefit the public in a way the law agrees is charitable. Most charities with an annual income of over £5,000 have to register with the Charity Commission. Although charities with an income of £5,000 or less (and some others) don't have to register with us, they still need to abide by charity law and almost all are regulated by us. [Charity Commission UK 2010]

Pedal Power is a cycling club for adults with physical and learning disabilities, run every other Saturday in Finsbury Park, London. The club provides a variety of bikes suitable for different skill levels and certified cycle trainers guide participants through a number of confidence building exercises.

Pedal Power had no existing website, and therefore required the completion of an entire site. I was responsible for the basic graphic design, as another group member had



A few members of Pedal Power during the Saturday cycling club in Finsbury Park

already created a logo and the organization was willing and able to produce the written and visual content for the site on their own.

## NONPROFIT ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

The Internet provides an opportunity for nonprofits to build relationships with those who need their assistance and potential donors, and to generally publicize their cause. Unfortunately, for many nonprofits, utilizing technology to a sufficient level to complete these objectives can be a daunting task. While many businesses have funding to hire specialist personnel, the nonprofit sector is often left to rely on volunteers or part-time staff who do not have the time or expertise to fully utilize the potential of the Internet for the non-profit in need. This lack of expertise compounded by the fact that nonprofits with websites perceived to be aesthetically pleasing and usable are seen to be more trustworthy, often receiving donations in greater frequency (Burt & Dunham 2009, Sargeant et al. 2005). Even with such monetary motivation, Burt and Taylor (2000) found that less than thirty-five percent of British voluntary organizations were using technology to showcase basic information online. While ten years ago, more recent statistics conducted by the Gifts in Kind survey (United States) showed that half of the nonprofits planning to use technology for advocacy or community involvement were actually doing it (Hackler & Saxton 2007: 481). Ingenhoff and Koelling found that Swiss nonprofits are missing out on opportunities to build relationships with their communities because there is a complete lack of use of technologies such as blogging and other interactive media forms (2009: 72). Thus, a portion of this study is dedicated not to giving recommendations for what must be included in a successful nonprofit website (i.e. design artifacts, applications or third party software), but how nonprofits can change the way they value and interact with technologies. Understanding where alterations in client – web designer relationships and software choices can be made, minimizing the issues related to initial technology access often plaguing nonprofit organizations.

## LIMITED TECHNOLOGY ACCESS

The reasons for limited access to technology are best determined by individual nonprofits; however, there are overarching factors that that can be said to influence a majority. The first is financial restriction. Nonprofits rarely set aside a portion of their budget for technology, leaving them scrambling to get whatever they can for as cheaply as possible (Hackler & Saxton, 2007). In the case of both Druid Cycles and Pedal Power, the production and updating of a website had been put on hold due to lack of monetary resources until a volunteer came along; and my research, allowing me to volunteer as a web designer, provided this opportunity. This financial restriction further limits technology access as initial purchase of computer hardware and software is often required, along with adequate training or hiring of skilled individuals for utilization and maintenance. One nonprofit employee stated:

...the problem starts there. It's a great website, I really like it, but it is not flexible. I can't access it. And it is expensive. So basically every time I need a change, I have to write it all up, send it to the designer with pics and he then gets it down through his guy in the backroom, does the design and that is fine, but every time it costs me money. So I don't update it as often as I would like to. [Interview with Meryl, 14 July 2010]

Secondly, nonprofits are first and foremost knowledgeable about their end goals and seek to raise awareness and promote action (Sargeant et al. 2005). As a result, nonprofits surround themselves with similarly-minded people that may or may not have technical expertise. For the two particular nonprofits I worked with, it was essential that I had passion for cycling and then knowledge of how to build websites. In the case of Druid Cycles and Pedal Power, technology was addressed as the opportunity came up so that they were able to spend the majority of their time focused on the resolution of greater cycling issues through other means.

The third issue relates to the amount of time and support required to continue using the technology after its implementation. Hired web designers or

volunteers come and go and so does their knowledge and expertise. This considerable need for outside assistance and training becomes an additional cost in time when dealing with the technology. For Pedal Power, a single member of the group had the technical skills, but insufficient time to build the site. For others, the concept of the “accidental techie” or “that guy who fixed the printer once”, often lands someone with an unwanted and impractical job role that takes away from their intended job responsibilities (King 2010). For Druid Cycles, that person was everyone in the shop, as employees had mechanical and engineering knowledge, but nothing directly linked to online matters. For many nonprofits, taking on a variety of tasks is a daily matter: reaching the *organization’s* end goal is the signifier of success, rather than *personal* job performance.

An extension of this issue is nonprofits’ view of technology as an external tool rather than an integrated actant within their organization. As a result, there is no positive relationship built with the technology and technology is expected to just work; “an unproblematic black box” (Latour, 1987: 91). But in order for the technology to work, the black box must be unpacked to a certain extent (1987: 100); not to a level of engineering knowledge, but to where the individual or organization is educated in a way that they feel comfortable with the website, understand what it can do for them, and to handle minor changes and issues. For many nonprofits, they are simply not provided with the means to unpack their website. As an example, I will discuss below how Druid Cycles’ website became a static entity as no one was willing to begin to understand how to use the Wordpress site.

*The Druid Cycles website: Gaining access to the black box*

To provide an example of a nonprofit’s impaired access to technology, I would now like to partially open the black box that is the Druid Cycles’ Wordpress website.

The Druid Cycles website had become a closed entity due to failure, between Thor, the owner of the shop, and the previous web volunteer, to communicate future means of access and a username and password. My first task was to gain access to the site through the proper admin username and password. This process ended up taking two weeks due to poor communication<sup>1</sup>, internet failure, my residence in Canterbury rather than London, power outages and lack of emailing.

Kristina,we have no power since 2pm today.the entire road is dark.thor  
[Thor Bard, pers.comm. 14 June 2010]

Hi Kristina,

I will e-mail Steve to assist you with the website access. We will miss you at Druid Cycles. Ion made something for you.

If you need to stay, please come the following week. the Bermondsey Square Exhibition is being prepared this week and starts from the 18th of June until the 4th of July at the Square.

Taking pictures from all the events would be interesting for the website and also for facebook. Maybe you can publish a few of the pics you have taken on the facebook Druid Cycles and on your own page.

The power was back this morning, the entire road and surrounding estates also where in the dark.

Philip started painting the "Asia" bike by candle light.

ciao thor [Thor Bard, pers.comm. 14 June 2010]

Kristina,internet is down alr.4 days,since victory of german team.what a coincidence.i am aware i have to do caching up.hope we can manage.we can talk tom. Looking forward seing u. Another us girl came today n wants to help.she comes thursday 1st day. Ions seats are wonderful.thor  
[Thor Bard 2010, pers.comm. 29 June 2010]

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<sup>1</sup> Thor's first language is German and while speaks fluent English, writing is more of a difficulty.



Entrance to the Druid Cycles shop/dungeon

The point of these emails and text messages, is not only the fact that Druid needs to find a better internet service provider, but that their lack of funds prevented them from doing so; the shop is equipped for bicycle repair not technology services; and it is an example of a nonprofit being left by a tech volunteer along with their expertise. Therefore, alliances that I expected to be built, in order for me to actually to update the website were not in place requiring me to find the best method of translating the interests of all involved actants to achieve the goal

of updating the website's content and teaching Thor along with a backup tech volunteer how to use the Wordpress site.

## PERCEPTIONS OF NONPROFIT TECHNOLOGY USE

### HOW NONPROFITS VIEW THEMSELVES AS TECHNOLOGY USERS

I would like to explain that in attempting to interview nonprofits about their technology use and perceptions, I emailed over one hundred organizations with additional attempts to setup interviews through contacts made at various networking events. Of those contacted I was only able to conduct two interviews to supplement my library research and participant observation experience.



A small sampling of the complete lack of responses from contacted nonprofits. Screenshot taken 27 August 2010. (In Gmail, responses are shown attached to original message as a thread – no responses appear here.)

I believe this in itself is representative of the lack of time that nonprofit have to spare, as well technological apprehension. Many of the rejections I received in emails told me that they did not believe they would be able to answer my questions because they lacked technological knowledge or my request was immediately forwarded to their web designer. Included below is my standard email sent to nonprofits requesting an interview:

Hello!

My name is Kristina Krause and I am a masters student at the University of Kent studying social anthropology. The topic of my research surrounds client – web designer relationships in the nonprofit sector with the goal of increasing technology use that promotes collaboration and self-sufficiency.

I am currently conducting interviews with nonprofits about their experiences with web designers and the process of creating a website for their organization.

I would be incredibly grateful, if the person(s) in your organization who were involved in approving or collaborating on website decisions would be willing to speak to me for approximately one hour about their views on the web design process. Simply to clarify; I wish to speak to the “non-tech” people involved to better appreciate differences in communication, knowledge and expectations.

I also would like to offer any minor technical assistance, website updates or volunteer work in exchange for your time.

Thank you and I hope that you will find this experience helpful in understanding the role of technology within your own organization!

Please contact me at: [Kristina.thesis@gmail.com](mailto:Kristina.thesis@gmail.com)

Further research details: [www.appliedanthrodesign.com](http://www.appliedanthrodesign.com)

Best,

Kristina Krause

...and one sample response:

Hi Kristina

I had your email forwarded to me from our party agent, my name is [John Doe] and I produced and manage the current site as it stands. I am unsure of how useful I can be but am willing to answer any questions you may have. My use of such systems is still in its infancy (1 - 1.5 years) and am very much still trying to identify the best ways in which to use the site for the association. I began with the intention of all councillors uploading articles and interacting with users, but that's changed now due to my better understanding of other peoples lack of interest in computers! But big plans are afoot though for change.

I'm sure you'll appreciate things are quite busy at present but if you give me a couple of days notice I can excuse myself from the proceedings, or arrange to work from home and free some time up during the day for the interviews.

Let me know and we can arrange something.

Kind regards,

[John Doe]

[19 April 2010]

Nonprofits' view of themselves as lacking in technological expertise was intriguing because this pointed toward a goal of becoming knowledgeable about practices and higher in technological skill level, when in fact, while it can be helpful, is not expected by the web designer. In the first days of participant observation with Druid Cycles, Thor just wanted me to do whatever I thought was necessary on the site, because he said he didn't know anything about web design. Additionally, starting in on the Pedal Power site, I was not receiving feedback from everyone in the group because they claimed my opinion would be more correct than theirs.

I realized that these claims of ignorance were received when I asked direct questions pertaining to the website, or asked for opinions on website documentation<sup>2</sup>. While the problem may seem to nonprofits that they are not technically adept enough, it appears the issue is more that nonprofits lack the technical language and a similar process for expression of their website needs.

Beginning these conversations as a way of triangulating data from any requests or design ethnography<sup>3</sup> conducted prior to website development is difficult and highly dependent on the technical literacy of the nonprofit client. On one level, the organization of websites follows a formula related to Internet standards that allows overall access for online users. These standards are not apparent to most users (e.g. logo on the left side [those reading left to right], discontinued use of splash pages, and font sizes). Furthermore, Wordpress has a series of norms and restrictions that will shape the content and design of a site (e.g. easy blog setup or switching between the visual and html text editor will "break" your page).

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 6 for specific discussion of workflow and documentation.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 4 for full description of research methods.

Another level requires creativity in content organization that can often be inspired by how a nonprofit views their own structural makeup and goals, and is possibly quite different from the web designer's observations.

Schematics and prototypes are all well and good and are decipherable by most people, but as stated by one Pedal Power volunteer, it takes imagination and experience to visualize what they mean for the final website. Direct discussions of website content were better received when asked as a discussion opener, "What do you want people to know about your organization?" and then bringing in a design document (see Chapter 6) rather than using the document themselves as the conversation starter. This act helped to put us on the same level, rather than one where I was perceived as an expert<sup>4</sup> and unable to be challenged in my conclusions.

All of the above assumes the nonprofit desires to be part of the web design process. I have assumed this because the nonprofits I worked with agreed to take on the project collaboratively and learn how to update the site themselves as I would not be available in the future, nor do they have the funds to hire outside assistance on a regular basis. While this could be seen as a restriction in my research, I disagree, as the intention of this study is not only to learn how to build a website that is better suited for the nonprofit in the first instance, but also to use design ethnography and Wordpress to better understand to what level a nonprofit can take on maintenance tasks and how as a web designer can I work with the nonprofit to get them comfortable in taking on these tasks. Before further discussing these issues, I will move onto web designers' view of nonprofit technology abilities to see where and if they meet the nonprofit's abilities.

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 6 for discussion of positivist views.

## WEB DESIGNERS' VIEWS OF NONPROFIT NEEDS

Through my research, I found there to be a discrepancy between those web designers I interviewed who use Wordpress as a tool, and those who participated at Wordcamp UK and are more involved in the Wordpress community<sup>5</sup>.

Those not at Wordcamp UK and who do not use Wordpress exclusively, found nonprofits to be the same as any other client they were working with.

No, they are all the same. The way we approach projects, the difference is that, for example in the public sector, there is no commercial goal, there is no sale etc... DVD book...There is no t-shirt at the end of the process. There is a bunch of information that people need to get and a task they need to complete, so it is the same. Just can't watch and listen to it and wear it, but it is still, as valuable in your life, that you need to find out about that particular thing, benefit, tax disk, whatever it is. So it doesn't change. Just the context changes, but then everything else is the same. [Interview with Simon Nixon, 6 June 2010]

No, not really, I don't think it is [working with nonprofits] a whole lot different. You are tailoring your work to a specific audience, same as you would anything else. No, I wouldn't say so. [Interview with Pete Cole, 5 June 2010]

In contrast, those designers who work nearly exclusively with Wordpress, attended WordCamp UK and predominately have nonprofit clients had strict views on working with nonprofits. During WordCamp one such web designer, Jason King, very clearly outlined his process when working with nonprofits and why he had chosen to work with Wordpress in the first place<sup>6</sup>. His comments were quite representative of my own interviews and the outlook of many others in attendance at WordCamp. He began by speaking to the best size of nonprofit for Wordpress, which was small to medium, using small or medium to mean size of website needs. For the web designer, I believe this differentiation is understandable, due to knowledge about the efforts needed to build certain

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<sup>5</sup> I had no problem finding web designers to interview about their workflow and methods.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.kingjason.co.uk/index.php/wordpress-small-charities-presentation-wordcamp-uk-2010>

types of sites, however difficult for others not experienced. In example, both Druid Cycles and Pedal Power can be considered a small to medium sized websites<sup>7</sup>.

King expressed a liking for working with nonprofits because of their passion, which in turn made them more pleasing to work with. However, working with such groups required an understanding of the fact that the third sector requires low cost solutions that speak to the greater audience of organizations, noting many nonprofits lose time and money on having to explore technology options that they have no basis for understanding.

While the above was agreeable to the rest of the group, there were a few points that spurred discussion. The first was that nonprofits were only interested in the monetary meaning of free software and were not aligned with Wordpress' greater goals. My own experience, and that of others, is that many nonprofits understand the value of both. The second contentious point was that nonprofit personnel needed to be spoken to in less "bloggy" terms, or in "plain English". The subjectivity of this comment proved too much for many in attendance, including myself, as the variety of people who work in nonprofits is high and for many the terminology of Wordpress is understandable because it is neither owned by the web designer nor the nonprofit.

A further use of Wordpress that King deemed essential for nonprofits was the ability for designer to work in small increments with Wordpress. Because of its flexible nature, if a nonprofit does not have enough money for a higher level of functionality all at once, they are able to build and pay in smaller sum. Moreover, this allows for a progressive educational strategy where nonprofits are able to learn how to use their websites effectively, one step at time. In turn, this education also lets nonprofits know what level of technical skill is necessary for what they are seeking. Education is not only about learning Wordpress as a

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<sup>7</sup> <http://druidcycles.co.uk> , <http://www.pedalpowercc.org/>

software, but about what website functionality means in terms of time spent in development for the web designer.

What I found interesting about this discussion was that it centered on making nonprofits manageable and taking care of their needs through a web design workflow based on web designers own experiences, assuming all nonprofits are in fact technologically inadequate. There was must less focus on any sort of collaboration, but rather making sure that Wordpress as a tool would continue to be a suitable option to fulfill the goals of organizations.

## CONCLUSION

The overarching factors in the above research, seen to be detrimental to nonprofit access to technology are: negative perceptions of technological abilities; and the intertwined social or environmental constraints that prevent acquisition of hardware or education. Nonprofits who perceive themselves as individuals ignorant to the processes of web design, as demonstrated through my lack of interviewee responses and unfavorable nonprofit reactions to design documentation, appear to be one starting place in altering the client – web designer relationship. To continue with these negative views can result in technology failure, as they impede the ability of actants to form the alliances necessary for a successful black box. A website will simply not reach its potential if the nonprofit client is uncomfortable maintaining their website.

It is not my intention to prescribe a specific level of technical expertise for nonprofits or a standardized workflow for web designers, but to stress the variety of ways in which Wordpress and design ethnography can be implemented. These actants prevent homogenization through their emphasis on collaboration, bringing in a variety of relations specific to the nonprofit and web designer. Thus, thwarting feelings of technological inadequacy in nonprofits by reminding web designers of the unstable and variable contexts in which nonprofit organizations are particularly inclined to reside.