Weblogs
- a powerful voice for campaigns?
The ability of voluntary sector organisations to give a voice to the excluded is one of the reasons why we continue to need a strong, active campaigning sector. As society becomes more diverse and as there are innumerable outlets for news, opinions and views it is important for sector organisations to continue to show that they are connected with their grass roots. Weblogs can do this. Not just a tool for computer ‘nerds’, ‘blogging’ is now something that anyone can do. At NCVO we have a vision of a sector that continues to show its relevance to the world by focusing on the people it helps and the voice it gives to their concerns. We believe that, in time, most voluntary sector organisations will one day be able to point to the weblog out there that gives a voice to their issues.
When I was first asked to blog I was a bit apprehensive and nervous. My immediate thought was "I can’t do that" and "what the hell is a blog anyway". I mean not too long ago I couldn’t read or write, now I was being asked to do something I hadn’t a clue about. Plus, I was told it would only take up an hour or so of my day. But two months on and it seems I’m at it longer than ever, sometimes late into the night or early in the morning.

On the Friday a month before the general election, I got together with the Hansard Society and they explained what a blog was and how to blog. I must admit it was all gobbledygook to me. I was told it was a sort of online diary. Then came the pièce de résistance - I had complete control over what I could put in it. My immediate thought was "yeah, pull the other leg it’s got bells on". After all, Crisis and the Hansard Society were funding it and who wants someone writing something that’s a bit too outspoken as sometimes I can be. Then I started worrying that I would not be able to do it, specially when it involved politics and homelessness but me being me I said "okay I’ll try it".

So I started to look at other blogs and found some to be quite tedious, not much humour and nothing to make me stay reading, particularly when it involved politics and homelessness but me being me I said “okay I’ll try it”. I got in to blogging, I became used to it. I started to write in my own style. I did not want the normal online blogs that I had read. I wanted my blog to use humour when I could. I set about trying to make it not boring to read and I put real life stories of homelessness with photos. Mixing politics into my blog was easy and I liked this form of writing. I found myself blogging every day.

I liked the fact that I could be funny when I thought it was appropriate and serious when I had to be. Finding the balance between the two was the hardest part. I mean finding something funny to say about politics is not easy at the best of times but I think I managed it. The one thing it has made me do is read the daily papers. I can pick a story and comment on it and link it. Reading really was not a strong point of mine. Having not too long ago learned the art of both reading and writing, I have enjoyed writing the way a reporter writes. Short and to the point. I have also learned from people in the street as one of the things I did was go on the street and ask questions. It was their opinions on some issues I have written about. I have also learned that I can challenge what politicians say. I can highlight things on many subjects. By blogging you can get your opinion and facts across to a wide variety of people. Some people have made comments and if you have a blog counter, it tells you how many people visit your blog. It’s then you know how many people visit your blog.

I want to experiment with online audio to do interviews with ordinary people as well as homeless people, so people can listen as well as read. I just thought it might be another way of blogging that may appeal to more people. The longer I keep blogging the more I want to do. I did notice however, that I set such a furious pace in the first month and now I have learned to pace myself and pick up on stories I think people will read. I have found that blogging is a really good way of getting your opinion and point across to thousands of people without being heckled or interrupted as you can when you are talking to people face to face and believe me when I say I have opinions. I personally think blogging can be used on any subject and I would recommend it as a tool to be used.
Imagine your next campaign. Imagine the media desperate for a new angle on your issues. Imagine being able to point them to a place where the genuine views of individuals can be seen, unfiltered, from the heart, at the grass roots. Weblogs can provide this for you.

For voluntary sector organisations, for membership bodies and for anyone with a constituency, weblogs provide an opportunity to give people a voice. And they can stimulate wider interest in the issues that matter. At Crisis we want to be more than a voice for homeless people, we want to give them their own voice and Jamie’s Big Voice does just that. Jamie McCoy is a remarkable man. An ex-addict who spent 35 years on the streets, he only learned to read and write four years ago. He is also an independent spirit with his own definite style. He may not be someone who would necessarily toe the Crisis policy line, but Jamie can write naturally. He has an energy and a passion for telling how it really is and no one can accuse him of being anyone’s stooge. He also has the personality and confidence that means he will talk to anyone about homelessness and will reflect their responses honestly.

I can hear now the voices of concern. “But, we won’t be able to control the message”. “What if a blogger writes something offensive?” “Will the media avoid us and talk to the blog?” In answer – you’re right, it’s possible. But if you’re committed to empowering people, to truly representing them, you have to accept that a weblog is not a vehicle to be controlled. Find the individuals with something to say and give them a platform to say it. We found that “giving” Jamie a voice was not such a radical move – it was a natural extension of our goal of empowering some of the most vulnerable people in society. Single homeless people are neglected, hidden away by society and are usually bottom of any priority list. Jamie’s blog illustrates, in a very personal way, an issue society does not recognise.

Jamie’s Big Voice is an example of a phenomenon that I believe should spread to every organisation that wishes to tell it like it really is. Let a thousand blogs bloom. Each one will capture one perspective of what it’s really like to live with a long-term chronic health condition, to live as a single mum, to be concerned about the destruction of our planet, or to be homeless. Weblogs should also be seen as a potential campaigning tool – albeit one over which you might not have input.

As a space for the issues, you can point to them as evidence of your own need to campaign and the need for a voice for the dispossessed and the ignored. Go on. Try it. You might like it.

For voluntary sector organisations, for membership bodies and for anyone with a constituency, weblogs provide an opportunity to give people a voice. And they can stimulate wider interest in the issues that matter. At Crisis we want to be more than a voice for homeless people, we want to give them their own voice and
‘A blog is essentially a meeting room without walls. It enables the blogger to create either a diary or just a sequence of entries which then invite the reader to leave their comments.’ Clive Soley from Why I am a Blogging MP.

Since the mid-Nineties when the term ‘blogging’ was first used, weblogs, more commonly known as ‘blogs’, have become a defining feature of the internet today.

Blogging with a political focus has taken off in the US. It has been used to varying degrees by underground and mainstream groups alike, and is to be found in almost every aspect of US political activity, from organising grass roots direct action to raising money for Presidential campaigns. The popularity and success of these US efforts have given blogs a global momentum as an alternative media campaigning tool.

Blogs have emerged as alternative media channels. Once the preserve of lone geeks, teen insomniacs and media anoraks, these sources of information are increasingly becoming a mainstream communications tool.

In the run up to the 2005 general election, Crisis felt that political parties were campaigning on a narrow list of policy issues and homelessness was not one of them. Crisis decided to start a campaign to promote their own agenda rather than respond to party manifestos. Crisis approached the Hansard Society e-Democracy Programme to help them look into ways in which online technology could promote issues from a homeless perspective throughout the general election campaign. It was agreed that a blog could be used to enable homeless people to start an effective dialogue with the media, prospective parliamentary candidates (PPCs), fellow members of the blogosphere and the general electorate concentrating minds on the reality of the individuals affected by homelessness.

How did it work?

In July 2004, the Hansard Society published Political Blogs - Craz or Convention?, a report examining the potential of the new phenomenon of political blogging. The report highlighted the use of blogging as a new media resource that can increase the transparency and accessibility of parliamentarians and their work. It also examined whether these blogs can offer an alternative to traditional channels of political communication in the UK.

In April 2005, authored by Jamie McCoy, an ex-homeless person. The initial aim was to have the site up and running throughout the election campaign, with the scope to continue afterwards if it was successful, and if the author enjoyed the experience.

From a very early stage, Crisis had earmarked Jamie McCoy as the prime candidate to be the author of the blog. Now in his early fifties, Jamie had been homeless since running away from home at fifteen, and has had problems with drink and drugs all his life. Until a couple of years ago, Jamie could not read or write, but has since learned to do so. He now writes poetry and children’s books. He was therefore very well qualified, with his own first-hand experiences, to raise the concerns of homeless people in a short blogging format.

One of the first requirements of the Hansard Society was to provide a review of the blogging platforms that were available and advise on the best one to use in this project. Blogger – a free and easy-to-use software was chosen as the most suitable platform to develop Jamie’s blog. This platform helped cut the costs of the project but also proved the best tool for a novice to start blogging in less than a week! The site was configured by the Hansard Society with Jamie, who then developed it further himself. The Society provided basic technical support and coaching, and helped Jamie promote his site. Former MP and prominent political blogger Richard Allan and the Guardian journalist Bobbie Johnson attended a workshop session to give Jamie useful tips and advice. Jamie’s blog listed all the relevant election sites and portals, including all the party candidates who themselves kept blogs, establishing his persona among peers.

The Hansard Society undertook both an off and online media campaign at the start of the project to drive users to the site. Jamie’s Big Voice was publicised through direct mailings, local media coverage, viral emails, web links and by word of mouth. Jamie’s Big Voice was monitored by the BBC, the Guardian, the Independent, the Times, the FT and CNN. It fast became one of the most talked about election blogs, and its author has become a media star and political commentator in his own right! And the focus was thus reflected on the wider campaign work of Crisis.
Conversations on the blog

The initiative came from Crisis and development from the Hansard Society but the spirit and content was Jamie’s alone.

Jamie has chosen a conversational rather than confessional style. He comments on more than the issue of homelessness, covering the various mainstream issues such as crime, health and immigration, and he managed to interview various people he came across during the campaign – homeless people in hostels, PPCs and members of the Homeless Peoples Panel that went on the Crisis nationwide tour. Jamie’s message came as a surprise for many readers, some of them homeless, that homeless people actually have the right to vote, despite being of ‘no fixed abode’.

His posts are provocative, sometimes verging on the mild rant, but that’s what gives them integrity. He is a prolific blogger, posting at least once a day, and he even has to store up material to avoid overloading the reader. Visitors to the site posted seventy-five comments during the election campaign. Some were on the different policy issues, but the majority expressed their support and encouragement. The comments below show the networking power of blogs.

Andy said...
Hi Jamie,
If they want to vote and they can vote, how can we empower the homeless to have their say? Are hostels, day centers etc. aware that the homeless have the right to vote? Maybe this information is something we could share through Skylight and the Open?! It’s just a shame we couldn’t do it in time for this election! Keep up the good work.

Liz Floodgate said...
Hi Jamie
Think this is a great idea. Have never written to a blogger before, so thought I’d try now. Question for you - how many of the guys on the streets know they have a vote and how do they do this without an address? Is a hostel an address?

Anonymous said...
Hi Jamie,
I met you in Tesco’s last week and you told me about your blog. I’ve been really enjoying reading it. It’s good to get a different perspective on British life than the one we hear from the men in power. Keep up the good work!

Chris said...
Dear Jamie
Leant about your fine website via the article in the Guardian. Please do check out ours - which is at the Gatehouse Homeless Dropin - http://home.binternet.com/GATEHOUSE/gatehouse.html

By Ross Ferguson and Barry Griffiths, Hansard Society e-Democracy Programme

Stepping into the blogosphere

How can you set up a blog?

The ‘beauty’ of blogging is that it allows anyone to publish a half-decent site online. At its most basic, setting up a blog requires only nominal investment and a bare minimum of technical appreciation. What it does need is a fair amount of imagination and interest in writing.

The software to set up a blog is readily available online and much of it is free. Blogging is big business today and there are a number of established companies offering ready-made blogs. These compete collectively, develop free-to-download ready-made or self-set-up blogs. Each product presents a slightly different play on the tried-and-tested blog-structure, appearance and back-end content management system.

The products

Because there is so much on offer it can be difficult to know where to start. Which software is easiest to set up? Which is the best for my purposes? Do I buy a market leader or customise an open-source platform?

There are no easy answers here and no one blog product or service is universally regarded as being the best. The options representing a cross-section of the market are outlined below.

www.drupal.org
Drupal is a widely-respected open-source platform and content management system for building websites. It offers a broad range of features and services including user administration, discussion capabilities, news aggregation, and basically most of the functionality a good blog needs. However, it requires a fair amount of effort to set up, though perhaps this will be offset by the pride you will take in the final product.

www.pivotlog.net
Pivotlog is a tool to create weblogs and other dynamic websites. The great thing about Pivotlog is that it’s free, functional and easy to use.

www.fotolog.net
Fotolog lets you easily put your digital photos on the web. Photoblogging can be very creative and informative, and may suit bloggers who would prefer to speak through the medium of image rather than word. Basic accounts are free.
Linking

... blogging is driven by its network potential. Alike blogs make a habit of linking up with each other and cross-referencing content. This practice is about making information as widely available as possible and establishing networks and communities. It also makes your blog more visible.

Linking was certainly what sparked off blogging and some would argue that it remains at the core of any blog. Although a blog shouldn’t become a mesh of links, the standard practice is to include links wherever possible within individual posts or in side-columns.

Commenting

... not all blogs allow visitors to comment on posts. Some platforms allow no commenting at all, others allow their authors to switch the facility off. This is considered ‘bad form’.

Commenting is not something to be feared, rather it is to be positively encouraged. Commenting is perhaps the most fundamental trait that differentiates a blog from a common-or-garden website.

Some blogs or posts receive no comments. When they do appear, some will be in agreement but do also offer alternative viewpoints. The ability to have this dialogue is the ‘social function’ that blogs fulfil.

Commenting allows the free-flow of ideas, the sharing of information and promotes free speech.

On occasion, commenting facilities are subject to misuse or irrelevant posting. Most decent platforms will allow authors to delete such posts. For any blogger who checks up on their content on a regular basis, this sort of thing should prove no more than a nuisance (if it ever happens at all). A good place to start looking for tools is at www.lights.com/weblogs/tools.html

Is keeping a blog difficult?

Once you have set up your blog, its destiny is in your hands. The maintenance of a blog can be the most demanding part of the whole process. The difficulty is not technical, rather it is about staying motivated to update content, interact with visitors and develop the potential of your blog.

So, before starting to blog, consider the following aspects of blogging and build a rough game-plan around them so that you are going in prepared...

Authoring

... the spirit of blogging demands that a blog be updated on a regular basis. This does not necessarily mean posting comments every day but it does mean making a commitment. Ideally, this commitment is honoured by the person who owns or is the ‘face’ of the blog.

Authoring is flexible. However, it is recognised as ‘good form’ in the blogging world to be completely truthful about the identity of the person who has carried out each update.

However, there is no hard-and-fast rule about who does the updating. For example, some blogging MPs delegate updating duties to members of their staff. Blogging can also be a group activity, with each member sharing responsibility for maintaining the blog.

www.blogger.com

Blogger is the heavy-weight in the blogging market. It is a blogging service provided by search engine giants, Google. Blogger has the biggest market-share and regards itself as the essence of ‘push-button publishing’. Blogger certainly looks the part, it has a good range of features (including photologging and moderated commenting) and provides extensive support.

It’s all for free as well. If there’s one piece of advice, it’s to check them all out before downloading. A comprehensive list of blogging platforms - from open-source or pay-to-use - can be found by Googling ‘weblog software’.

www.blogger.com

Blogger is the heavy-weight in the blogging market. It is a blogging service provided by search engine giants, Google. Blogger has the biggest market-share and regards itself as the essence of ‘push-button publishing’. Blogger certainly looks the part, it has a good range of features (including photologging and moderated commenting) and provides extensive support.

It’s all for free as well. If there’s one piece of advice, it’s to check them all out before downloading. A comprehensive list of blogging platforms - from open-source or pay-to-use - can be found by Googling ‘weblog software’.

Add-ons

... blogging is one of the fastest moving areas of the web in terms of development. Although there is a standard structure to blogs, there are plenty of tools available that can add extra layers of functionality.

Some add-ons are useful (search forms, audio players, news feeds), others are just quirky (weather forecasts, random image generators, Space Invaders games). It is worth playing about with different tools to improve your blogging capability, technical skills and the blog’s overall appeal amongst the millions of others out there.

www.blogger.com

Blogger is the heavy-weight in the blogging market. It is a blogging service provided by search engine giants, Google. Blogger has the biggest market-share and regards itself as the essence of ‘push-button publishing’. Blogger certainly looks the part, it has a good range of features (including photologging and moderated commenting) and provides extensive support.

It’s all for free as well. If there’s one piece of advice, it’s to check them all out before downloading. A comprehensive list of blogging platforms - from open-source or pay-to-use - can be found by Googling ‘weblog software’.

Add-ons

... blogging is one of the fastest moving areas of the web in terms of development. Although there is a standard structure to blogs, there are plenty of tools available that can add extra layers of functionality.

Some add-ons are useful (search forms, audio players, news feeds), others are just quirky (weather forecasts, random image generators, Space Invaders games). It is worth playing about with different tools to improve your blogging capability, technical skills and the blog’s overall appeal amongst the millions of others out there.

Commenting

... not all blogs allow visitors to comment on posts. Some platforms allow no commenting at all, others allow their authors to switch the facility off. This is considered ‘bad form’.

Commenting is not something to be feared, rather it is to be positively encouraged. Commenting is perhaps the most fundamental trait that differentiates a blog from a common-or-garden website.

Some blogs or posts receive no comments. When they do appear, some will be in agreement but do also offer alternative viewpoints. The ability to have this dialogue is the ‘social function’ that blogs fulfil.

Commenting allows the free-flow of ideas, the sharing of information and promotes free speech.

On occasion, commenting facilities are subject to misuse or irrelevant posting. Most decent platforms will allow authors to delete such posts. For any blogger who checks up on their content on a regular basis, this sort of thing should prove no more than a nuisance (if it ever happens at all). A good place to start looking for tools is at www.lights.com/weblogs/tools.html

www.blogger.com

Blogger is the heavy-weight in the blogging market. It is a blogging service provided by search engine giants, Google. Blogger has the biggest market-share and regards itself as the essence of ‘push-button publishing’. Blogger certainly looks the part, it has a good range of features (including photologging and moderated commenting) and provides extensive support.

It’s all for free as well. If there’s one piece of advice, it’s to check them all out before downloading. A comprehensive list of blogging platforms - from open-source or pay-to-use - can be found by Googling ‘weblog software’.

Add-ons

... blogging is one of the fastest moving areas of the web in terms of development. Although there is a standard structure to blogs, there are plenty of tools available that can add extra layers of functionality.

Some add-ons are useful (search forms, audio players, news feeds), others are just quirky (weather forecasts, random image generators, Space Invaders games). It is worth playing about with different tools to improve your blogging capability, technical skills and the blog’s overall appeal amongst the millions of others out there.

Commenting

... not all blogs allow visitors to comment on posts. Some platforms allow no commenting at all, others allow their authors to switch the facility off. This is considered ‘bad form’.

Commenting is not something to be feared, rather it is to be positively encouraged. Commenting is perhaps the most fundamental trait that differentiates a blog from a common-or-garden website.

Some blogs or posts receive no comments. When they do appear, some will be in agreement but do also offer alternative viewpoints. The ability to have this dialogue is the ‘social function’ that blogs fulfil.

Commenting allows the free-flow of ideas, the sharing of information and promotes free speech.

On occasion, commenting facilities are subject to misuse or irrelevant posting. Most decent platforms will allow authors to delete such posts. For any blogger who checks up on their content on a regular basis, this sort of thing should prove no more than a nuisance (if it ever happens at all). A good place to start looking for tools is at www.lights.com/weblogs/tools.html
And the blog goes on...

Jamie’s blog is an open-ended project, something more than a PR campaign of limited duration. It has the potential for growth and it has got off to a good start. At the time of writing, Jamie’s Blog has had 5023 visitors with 2570 unique visitors, 1644 first time visitors and 926 returning visitors and according to the Yahoo! search engine there were 401 links to Jamie’s blog while MSN Search found 646 links. As Jamie’s current strap-line heading his blog says: “The blog does not stop just because the election is over.”

On 31 May Jamie posted a message in which not only was he drawing attention to the huge number of so-called “hidden homeless” (380,000) but was also correcting a piece in the Independent:

“When you come up with a figure like three hundred and eighty thousand hidden homeless, people ask how you came by these figures and what does hidden homeless mean? Well, firstly being homeless just doesn’t mean sleeping on the streets. The Independent newspaper (1) got it half right when it told of homeless men and women sleeping on buses and friends sofas. ... The government has no official figures on homelessness. That is why Crisis (2) are asking for a census and I do agree with the Independent that if Tesco can count how many water melons they sell, we can count the actual number of homeless and hidden homeless.”

It turned out that the Independent newspaper were monitoring Jamie’s Big Voice and contacted Jamie to arrange a meeting as a result of his post – highlighting the campaigning power of blogs and the high-regard they obviously hold Jamie in as a writer and expert on homelessness, or to put it in the author’s own words:

“I think I am proof (3) that with help people can change and I think by giving people the means to change is empowering them to do it for themselves.”

1) Focus: They sleep on the night buses, or beg sofa space from friends. They have nowhere else to go. They are the hidden homeless, The Independent, 25 May 2005


3) HOMELESSNESS BLOGGER CHALLENGES ELECTION CANDIDATES, Crisis Press Releases, 14 April 2005 http://www.crisis.org.uk/media/display.php?id=212

Examples of good practice

www.technorati.com
... not so much a blog as a good directory of blogs and what’s hot in the blogosphere at the present time. This site trawls links and conversations taking place on blogs and rates their popularity accordingly.

http://www.lynnefeatherstone.org/blog.htm
... Lynne Featherstone became an MP at the 2005 election and uses her blog effectively to engage with her electorate.

http://www.richardallan.org.uk/
... Richard Allan is a former Lib Dem MP and very experienced blogger with a large audience.

http://weblog.greenpeace.org
... a good example of a campaign blog is supplied by Greenpeace UK.

www.downingstreetsays.com
... grabs data from the official Downing Street site’s Press page and then allows the public to comment.

www.jamiesbigvoice.com

www.hansardsociety.org.uk
www.crisis.org.uk
www.epolitix.com
www.ncvo-vol.org.uk
Crisis
66 Commercial Street
London E1 6LT
Tel: 0870 011 3335
Fax: 0870 011 3336
Email: enquiries@crisis.org.uk
Website: www.crisis.org.uk

Crisis UK (trading as Crisis)
Charity no. 1082947. Company no. 4024938

Hansard Society
9 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6XF
Tel: 020 7395 4000
Fax: 020 7395 4008
Email: hansard@hansard.lse.ac.uk
Website: www.hansardsociety.org.uk
Charity no. 1091364.

© Crisis, 2005
Designed and produced by Lawrence & Pierce, Nottingham - supporting Crisis