Aid agency blogging: Seizing opportunities, minimising risks

Greater immediacy, openness and interactivity are just a few of the advantages of blogging as a way for aid agencies to communicate about their work. But those are benefits that have eluded many organisations testing the waters of this new medium. Blogging has even inspired fear within aid groups as the perceived risks and required processes seem too much to handle.

On July 24, 2008 Reuters AlertNet hosted a blogging workshop at its London headquarters to help members and content partners get to grips with the brave new world of blogging. Nearly 50 people attended, representing 30 British-based organisations.

They were joined by a panel of experts from the media and non-profit sector.

This report is based on workshop sessions in which aid agency staff and experts shared their experiences and explored ways to move forward.

TO BLOG OR NOT TO BLOG?

When aid agency staff listed the advantages of blogs as a means of communication, they came up with a long list of key words – *transparency*, *immediacy*, *freedom of speech*, *interaction*, *accessibility*, *giving a voice to beneficiaries*.

They then uniformly agreed that these words don't necessarily characterise aid agency blogs as they exist. And alongside the good stuff, there are the horror stories of security breaches that have become institutional lore.

Many aid agencies have tried their hand at entering into the blogosphere and have had varying levels of success in attracting readers and creating an engaged community. Attitudes about blogging tend to differ across national branches of international organisations. North American branches seem the most interested in blogging and the most willing to do so.

Blogs offer the potential for debate that can't be had through other forms of aid agency communications, but to do this they have to be done well and a number of operational and editorial roadblocks need to be overcome.

Participants broke down the potential advantages of blogging in terms of different organisational stakeholders to help illuminate them.

Advantages for headquarters

- Can help create a buzz around events or appeals
- A way to address specific groups of supporters, especially young people
- Can help funders see the bigger picture of what their money is supporting
- Give room to produce material that may not fit with mainstream media interests
- Good for recruitment as personal aid worker stories show what life is really like for staff
- Provide HQ with better information about what's happening on the ground
- More digestible form of communication than official reports

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Advantages for field staff

- Help them communicate qualitative aspects of their work (the personal stories that give small examples of success).
- Give space for talking about collaboration with other organisations
- Make it easier to address challenges and failures

As organisations consider these advantages, there is a general sense, or what some called an "organisational panic", that aid agencies HAVE to start blogging. That if they don't engage in web 2.0 social networking opportunities, they risk being left behind and missing out on key supporter and donor audiences.

That said, given the difficulties some organisations have experienced in navigating this medium, one group got to discussing whether aid agencies need to be blogging at all. Do they? Perhaps the jury is still out…

WHAT ARE THE HANG-UPS?

Getting blogging right isn't easy, and many institutional hurdles stand in the way. Some are operational and others editorial.

Convincing the big cheeses
Participants said the first issue they face is to convince management of the value of blogging for the organisation. There is a need to overcome management assumptions and misconceptions with regards to cost of technology and implementation.

Making the time
Once the idea of blogging has been accepted in principle, there is then the issue of how to make it happen, the maintenance problems. In what became a constant refrain, one of the main issues in maintaining blogs is the limited time allocated for staff to focus on blogging. Even when blogging gathers some speed and outgrows the administration dedicated to it, job roles aren't updated accordingly.

Who has ownership?
This is sometimes tied up with the issue of access to technology. In an ideal world blogs give a voice to aid agency beneficiaries and local staff. But when reliable internet connections are hard to come by, posts are undoubtedly filtered back through headquarters somehow. This means the blogger may feel a loss of ownership of their work and the immediacy disappears.

Speaka my language?
Some agencies have wrestled with the challenges of running blogs in more than one language. Do you translate them, and if so, how do you do it quickly? Having to find bloggers that speak the language of the head office has been a limiting factor of blogging for some organisations, and it does of course bring up ideological issues of the local voice that blogs could potentially represent.

Quality control
As one participant succinctly put it: "Getting a blog is one thing, getting a good blog is another." Are blogs different from other aid agency publications? Should they be produced under a different system of scrutiny?

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Freedom of speech
Participants agreed there is a tension between the "freedom of speech" that blogs are meant to offer and the controlled way in which most organisations conduct their public communications and "brand" messaging. But it's not just about an attitude. There's a danger that bloggers express strong personal opinions or accusations and compromise their employer's impartiality, or even land them in legal trouble.

The view is not just from headquarters. One participant said senior management was all for blogging but that country directors dealing with sensitive issues were anxious about taking part. There are also issues of self-censorship with field-staff blogging. Other members of the team react to colleagues sharing information about their personal lives.

Setting up firewalls
A solution to some of these anxieties might be to put space between blog content and official organisational content. This could be done by perhaps hosting blogs off of the official website or allowing staff to write personal blogs with a disclaimer that their views don't represent the organisation. Is that possible, or do views expressed even on personal blogs represent the organisation?

The yawn factor
What if an organisation's blog doesn't say anything contentious but is simply boring? This too reflects badly on the agency.

Nurturing talent
One participant said that once you've found good bloggers within the organisation, getting them to blog again depends on doing some hand-holding, pointing out the numbers of views and comments their material is getting.

Too many cooks
A lack of continual posts can lead to a "one blog, lots of contributors" model. This creates a very head-office feel - perhaps even like head office staff blogging from their holiday. Participants were critical of this current form of much aid agency blogging: a white aid worker "discovering" a foreign land. Not only can this be patronising but the descriptions and opinions voiced in blogs written by people going out to a country on a flying visit are different from those of a seasoned aid worker based in the field. The latter might get annoyed that their more nuanced views would be overridden by blogs of the "Blimey, it's hot out here!" variety.

Living the high life?
The informal tone of blogs might seem like a good thing to those people tired of other forms of aid agency communications, but some participants expressed concern that blogs can give the impression that aid workers are living the high life. If bloggers get too informal and start writing about parties and swimming pools then donors, or maybe even their colleagues at headquarters, may think these people are simply having a jolly good time and not working hard enough.

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NUTS AND BOLTS

The all important sign-off

A constant refrain in the workshop sessions was the importance of having a plan for the sign-off process. It's also essential to clarify the boundaries of appropriate content. Without a system agreed on in advance, it's possible that bloggers take advantage, most likely inadvertently, of the space afforded to them. Guidelines about what is and is not appropriate to write about are helpful for them as well.

All organisations appear to have some form of checks on their blog content. One participant said communications in their agency were very centralised and they had never published anything without it being cleared. Another said their system was more informal with some established bloggers allowed to publish stuff that was checked afterwards.

Participants advocated having a sign-off person who could vet material quickly in order to get blogs up fast. Senior managers should only be involved in the process if the material is contentious. If this system isn't in place, blogs lose their advantage of immediacy.

Screening out the crackpots

It might go against the usual image of blogs as stories told by individuals, but the fact is that there is usually some form of oversight or editing of aid agency blogs. Blog comments, however, fall under a different set of rules. The decision-making process behind moderating comments must be transparent and clearly stated. Moderating comments DOES NOT mean editing them, as agencies take on a legal liability for comments if they edit them at all. *Every blog should include a disclaimer that says the views expressed are not those of the organisation*.

To create a blog community, an organisation first has to start accepting blog comments and engaging with the audience. This is something aid agencies say they've struggled to do. Their blogs might have high readership statistics, but there's a deafening silence from the readers. Without an engaged audience, blogs cannot be self-moderated. Only an active community will speak out against posts that it finds offensive and in this way help to control the dialogue.

It remains to be seen whether organisations will be willing to have self-moderated blogs even with an engaged audience, but for now a system has to be in place for dealing with comments. One option is simply to moderate all comments. Less time-intensive is to allow direct posting but then remove unsavoury posts on review. Another possibility is for expert moderators to regulate the comments for a specific topic. It can be frightening for an organisation to feel they're hosting controversial debates, which is why it's important to be clear on the site about what types of comments will be approved for posting.

MOVING FORWARD

Here are participants' pointers for how aid agencies can succeed in blogging.

Get head honchos onside

Powerful and enthusiastic blogging champions within an organisation are vital. One organisation said that having a legal champion on board to draw clear lines about what can and cannot be said enabled the organisation to feel safe blogging.

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One tactic that proved successful in influencing senior people was to sell blogs on the basis of organisational values that they'll enhance rather than the traffic they might generate. Values like openness and transparency. Or even better – the NGO buzzword of accountability!

Producing blogs that sing

Bloggers often need a bit of practice to develop their own personal voices, especially if they're used to writing in a more formal style. They'll need to learn to cut out the acronyms and give some background information that the average reader might not know.

Here are some other key tips:

- **Good guidelines:** It's helpful to give bloggers upfront advice about dos and don'ts, and what sorts of postings could jeopardise employee safety to avoid possible pitfalls and minimise the editing needed.

- **Feedback loop:** Everyone wants to know if they're actually being read. There's a lot of vanity in blogging – something to watch out for actually. But be sure to promote blogs to the bloggers. Some agencies have found it's helpful to send bloggers statistics on their readers. This doesn't have to be in numbers – one useful way is to send maps showing where readers are around the world. "It makes them happy to see they're global, even if it's just one dot in Tanzania," one contributor said.

- **Go native:** Let people speak in their own language! To get good content in the language of the head office, one solution is to have a manager who writes a summary about foreign-language entries. People who've tried multi-lingual blogs say it's very important to include tags to the relevant language. It's not only about written material. An advantage of blogging is that you allow people to communicate in the way that they're most comfortable with, perhaps through videos or photos. There are translation and sub-title programs available (see www.dotsub.com) that would still allow this material to be integrated into the main website.

- **Into the mainstream?** One participant asked whether the field-reports-back-to-headquarters format could be changed so blogging becomes an integral part of what staff are asked to do. Most seemed doubtful, but it's a forward-thinking view.

- **Highlight the gems:** It may seem a simple solution, but opening up to more blogs from staff and beneficiaries without being too picky about writing and language skills will allow some real gems to crop up. By having blog content en masse the organisation will be able to pick out some good ones to highlight. Once staff are involved and understand the blogging process, they will start to suggest people and find good bloggers.

- **Hyperlinks to the rescue:** Although they undoubtedly exist, time constraints should not be limiting. Write a short blog and link to other sites or blogs. The more links out to other sites, the more return traffic.

- **Trust and ownership:** Give bloggers ownership over their space, or as much as is possible within the operational and sign-off structures. If they have to submit posts to

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headquarters, make sure they also see the comments that are generated and are provided with feedback.

- **Say no to spam:** Spam can be controlled by using Akismet (http://akismet.com/). Registration of users before they can post can be done using Openid (http://openid.net/).

Getting an audience

Blogs can provide an aid agency with a new audience as well as providing them with a new and more interactive way of reaching their existing supporters. Here are some tips.

- **Get yourself Googled:** To help increase the blog's position on search engines, it's good to include phrases in titles and in the text that will get picked up as search terms. Avoid abbreviations of names or too much "aid agency speak" as that's not how the average reader will search for content. It's important to try to get bloggers active in commenting on other blogs because the linkages will help to drive traffic.

- **Cross-fertilise:** The organisation should contribute blogs to other sites with similar audiences. It's important to use other sites when appropriate and not demand that everything must go on the organisation's website first – the blog might be more successful elsewhere. Sometimes hosting a blog elsewhere can help to get over some of the sign-off hurdles and more licence can be given.

- **Social networking:** Organisations can also set up a separate site still under their own control on which to host blogs. One organisation has set up a social networking hub where blogs of staff members and supporters are unedited. This has proved much more successful than the blogs on the main site that were edited, and more staff are keen to contribute because it feels safer to write.

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