Online Civic Engagement – Discussion with Report Authors

On June 2, 2005, *PACE* and the E-Volve Foundation convened a teleconference discussion on the report *Power to the Edges: Trends & Opportunities in Online Civic Engagement*. Approximately 20 people joined the call. The call featured the report's authors Jillaine Smith, Marty Kearns, and Allison Fine and was hosted by *PACE* deputy director Tina Cheplick.

Author Jillaine Smith launched the discussion by identifying some major shifts that are occurring because of online engagement:
- Organizers are now able to inform and recruit volunteers within hours for last-minute or short-term efforts, at minimal cost.
- Individuals are bypassing established organizations and generating their own advocacy campaigns and projects.
- Individuals are getting their messages in front of the public without going through mainstream media.

Marty Kearns emphasized that although the report looked at changes and innovations in the technology of telecommunications and online engagement, the real change has been the social change and the creation of a new, online culture. This is a huge shift that has opened up new strategies for connecting and engaging people.

Jillaine gave a quick review of the major strategy shifts outlined in the report that have implications for nonprofits and the foundations that support them: campaign genesis, communications, field management and fundraising.

Call participants asked questions and raised issues. Among the topics raised were:
- How online communications aided the tsunami relief efforts,
- How online announcements and ads during political campaigns are being forwarded, especially within communities of color,
- Using cell phones to connect social networks,
- How young people are using technology to connect with and expand their social networks, and
- The risks and advantages of "viral" networking: reaching new audiences, but not knowing where and how your information is moving through various networks, and possibly changing in form and content.

Marty noted that a certain demographic (<15%) within the population likes to join organizations, but for the rest we need to design models that will meet people in the situations where they already feel comfortable and know others, for example, a Superbowl party.

Allison explained that many of the online engagement tools cited in the report were developed and practiced by relatively short-term projects –campaigns for electoral politics -- but the tools work for longer term change as well. The technology now enables two-way conversations and changes the relationship between and among organizations and activists, supporters, and potential members and contributors.

The authors talked about how the application of technology is hindered by the generational divide, not just a digital divide (lack of access to hardware). Among young people Instant Messaging (IM) is what the phone was a generation ago, and what the written letter was

several generations before that. To reduce the cultural gaps and generational divides, the authors advise thinking through appropriate tools for the audience, and considering the tools that the audience is already using, for example, email vs. cell phones vs. blogging.

In response to a question about where to find the people that will support your cause, Marty said that in thinking about online campaigns, organizations first need to ask themselves, "If 10,000 people gave us 10 minutes, what would we ask them to do? Could we use them? What if 50,000 people responded? Could we handle that?"

As the call closed, the groups listed some questions that could be explored in the online blog (http://evolvefoundation.org/?q=blog.) or in the next version of the report, anticipated for 2006.

- How much online activity does it take to make someone "engaged?" Does reading email constitute civic engagement?

- What's the power of these online tools? What does it take in online messages or engagement to change people's minds?

- The examples in the report are national in scope, with large numbers – what about campaigns that aim to engage 50 rather than 1 million people? Are there different implications or different advice if your campaign is targeted to a local community instead of a national audience?

- How costly would it be for a small community organization to mount a campaign with online tools? What does it take in technology and people-power for a successful campaign?

- Where does infrastructure fit into the vision of greater online engagement by more people, for example the online "libraries" or databanks of information that activists and individual citizens can use and cite?

- There was a request for more examples of online engagement tactics and innovations developed over time. Ask organizations and foundations to share examples, their experiences, and the lessons learned.

The call closed with a request to all participants to pass on the report to their personal networks of foundation and nonprofits, and to post questions and thoughts on the report blog at http://evolvefoundation.org/?q=blog.