

## ABSTRACT

### Non-Profit Organizations' Use of the Internet to Tell Human Interest Stories: A Content Analysis of Non-Profit Web Sites

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This thesis explored how non-profit organizations utilized the Internet to frame their causes through personal stories that illustrate the good works and acts of charity performed by the organization. A sample of 26 non-profit health charities' Web sites produced 344 "good works" stories that were coded. The study looked particularly at the prominence and prevalence of good works stories on the non-profit Web sites, as well as how the organizations incorporated other elements such as multimedia, calls to action and opportunities for the reader to participate. The findings indicate health charities do utilize their Web sites to prominently portray stories that illustrate the organizations' good works. However, there is great discrepancy in the extent to which these organizations present these stories. While a few organizations' Web sites provided model examples in the prominence, prevalence and synergy of good works stories, the majority did not utilize the medium to its fullest capacity.

Non-Profit Organizations' Use of the Internet to Tell Human Interest Stories:  
A Content Analysis of Non-Profit Web Sites

by

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A Thesis

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

Anthropologist Margaret Mead's 20th-century observation of the potential for citizens to drive social change now takes new meaning in the 21st century, where the way the world communicates is evolving more rapidly than ever before. The non-profit sector of society is experiencing unprecedented growth—1.4 million charitable organizations exist in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>—and society is improved in vast ways by the untold number of good works performed by non-profits. Non-profit organizations provide homeless teenagers shelter, supply impoverished nations with food and clean water, build inner-city recreation centers, and protect endangered species. The list goes on, but all non-profits' missions have one thing in common—a fundamental goal to improve society through acts of charity.

### *Non-Profit Organizations*

The United States is known for its charitable giving and willingness to support worthwhile causes. The U.S. government often leads the world in lending support to less fortunate nations in times of crisis, natural disasters and war. And on an individual level,

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<sup>1</sup>Independent Sector, "Facts and Figures about Charitable Organizations," 1, [http://www.independentsector.org/programs/research/Charitable\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](http://www.independentsector.org/programs/research/Charitable_Fact_Sheet.pdf) (accessed September 8, 2007).



American people also are committed to supporting others in need. Whether donating canned goods for a church food drive in one's local community or making a donation to help fund children's education in war-torn Sudan, Americans are philanthropically generous.

### *Size and Scope of the Non-Profit Sector in the U.S. Economy*

Not surprisingly, countless non-profit organizations devoted to every cause imaginable have been established to facilitate Americans' philanthropic giving and support. Recent statistics indicate there are 1.4 million charitable and religious organizations in the United States that qualify as non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations.<sup>2</sup> Organizations that qualify for 501(c)(3) status must benefit the broad public interest, such as homeless shelters, hospitals, religious congregations, museums and public access radio/television stations. In recognition of this service for the public good, the government designates that these organizations are exempt from federal income tax and it deems donations to non-profit organizations as tax deductible.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the 1.4 million 501(c)(3) organizations, there are also nearly 140,000 501(c)(4) social welfare organizations, such as the National Rifle Association and the Sierra Club. Since 501(c)(4) organizations have more latitude in influencing politics through lobbying, advocacy and supporting political campaigns, the contributions to such organizations are not tax deductible.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Independent Sector, "Facts and Figures," 1.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 2.

The non-profit community grew exponentially in the last three decades as various entities established more organizations to meet the needs of the segments of society that require support. According to Independent Sector, a nonpartisan coalition of approximately 600 non-profit organizations, the number of non-profits in the U.S. has doubled in the last 25 years, and “from 1987 to 2006, the number of charitable organizations registering with the IRS has grown at double the rate of the business sector.”<sup>5</sup>

As such, non-profit organizations have a significant impact on employment and the U.S. economy. In 2004, 501(c)(3) organizations employed 9.4 million individuals, accounting for approximately 7.2 percent of the U.S. economy.<sup>6</sup> Many non-profit organizations utilize volunteers who donate their time to help further the organization’s mission, whether by sorting clothes that have been donated for needy children or delivering hot meals to elderly citizens through Meals on Wheels. When taking into account volunteer service, the total workforce of non-profit organizations climbs to the equivalent of 14.1 million full-time employees.<sup>7</sup> Put in perspective, the workforce of the charitable non-profit sector represents 10.5 percent of the nation’s total workforce, which outnumbers the combined employment of the utility, wholesale trade and construction industries all taken together.<sup>8</sup> Not only does the non-profit sector employ a significant

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Lester M. Salaman and S. Wojciech Sokolowski, *Employment in America’s Charities: A Profile* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, December 2006), <http://www.jhu.edu/~ccss/research/pdf/Employment%20in%20Americas%20Charities.pdf> (accessed September 9, 2007), 3.

<sup>7</sup>Independent Sector, 3.

<sup>8</sup>Salaman and Sokolowski, 3.

number of individuals, it also is growing at a much higher rate than the rest of the economy. Between 2002 and 2004, the nonprofit workforce grew by 5.3 percent, a stark contrast to the 0.2 percent decline in the nation's overall employment during the same period.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the non-profit sector can be considered a major employer in the United States.

In addition to employment statistics, other economic indicators show that the non-profit sector accounts for a significant portion of our nation's economy. It is estimated by the Urban Institute that when compared to other sectors of the economy, the non-profit sector accounts for 5.2 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>10</sup>

Of the non-profit organizations that reported receipts to the IRS in 2004, these 501(c)(3) organizations accounted for \$1.4 trillion in revenue and \$3 trillion in assets.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that these revenue and asset figures are not evenly distributed across all categories of non-profit organizations. Healthcare organizations and institutions of higher education are considered 501(c)(3) organizations, but these types of organizations have significantly higher revenue and expenses than other segments of the non-profit sector. For example, healthcare entities and hospitals—which generate revenues from the care they provide to patients—account for well over half of public charity revenues even though they only constitute 13 percent of total non-profit organizations. And colleges and universities—which possess land, buildings and endowment funds—account for 22 percent of the sector's assets even though they

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>10</sup>The Urban Institute, "The Nonprofit Sector in Brief: Facts and Figures from the Nonprofit Almanac 2007," 1, [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311373\\_nonprofit\\_sector.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311373_nonprofit_sector.pdf) (accessed September 17, 2007).

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 2.

constitute less than one percent of non-profit organizations.<sup>12</sup> Human service organizations are the most common type of non-profit organization, yet they account for less than 14 percent of non-profit revenues and less than 12 percent of non-profit assets.<sup>13</sup>

Employment, revenues and assets are good indicators of growth trends not only in the non-profit sector, but also of growth in the number of social causes, issues and services that demand attention from the nation's public charities. The substantial growth in both the number of public charities and the non-profit workforce demonstrates that "America's non-profit organizations not only contribute to the social and political life of the nation, but to its economic life as well."<sup>14</sup> In addition, the uneven distribution of revenues and assets among 501(c)(3) organizations is a solid reminder that these 1.4 million non-profit organizations vary considerably in size, number of staff and volunteers, and—often most important to accomplishing their mission—resources.

#### *Scope of Organizations' Missions in the Non-Profit Sector*

From promoting the arts to prevailing over poverty, from cleaning the environment to improving education for poor children, the American non-profit sector provides an impressive and diverse assortment of programs to improve society. The IRS uses the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities - Core Codes (NTEE-CC) system to classify public charities for recognition of tax-exempt status. The NTEE-CC

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 10.

classification system divides all nonprofit organizations into 26 major groups under 10 broad categories. The major groups represented in the 10 categories are:<sup>15</sup>

- I. Arts, Culture and Humanities: museums, symphonies, community theaters
- II. Education: private colleges and universities, independent elementary and secondary schools
- III. Environment and Animals: zoos, bird sanctuaries, land protection groups, wildlife organizations
- IV. Health: hospitals, nursing homes, public clinics, crisis intervention services, disease research
- V. Human Services: housing and shelter, sports and recreation programs, youth programs, public safety, nutrition programs, soup kitchens
- VI. International and Foreign Affairs: overseas relief and development assistance
- VII. Public and Societal Benefit: this catchall category includes civil rights, advocacy and social action organizations, private and community foundations, civic, social and fraternal organizations, community capacity building, and science/technology/social science research institutes
- VIII. Religion Related: houses of worship and services relating to spiritual development
- IX. Mutual/Membership Benefit
- X. Unknown, Unclassified

Of the 10 subsectors of non-profit organizations, the most common type is human service organizations (35 percent), with nearly twice as many organizations as the next largest category, education (18 percent).<sup>16</sup> Following human service and education organizations, the most common subsectors are healthcare, public and societal benefit, and arts, culture and humanities.<sup>17</sup> One can reason that the human service and the public/societal benefit subsectors account for significant numbers of public charities since these particular subsectors serve as ‘catchall’ categories—that is, the subsector encompasses a wide-ranging array of organizations’ missions.

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<sup>15</sup>National Center for Charitable Statistics, “National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities,” <http://nccs.urban.org/classification/NTEE.cfm> (accessed September 8, 2007).

<sup>16</sup>The Urban Institute, 2.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

It is important to note that the United States has approximately 350,000 religious congregations, and though they are considered public charities, they are not required to register with the IRS. In fact, only about half of these congregations do register with the IRS.<sup>18</sup> In addition, very small organizations—those with less than \$5,000 in annual revenue—are not required to register with the IRS.<sup>19</sup> For example, many Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA), neighborhood associations and community theater groups do not surpass gross annual receipts of \$5,000, thus they are not officially registered with the IRS as public charities. It must be assumed that the prevalence of the 10 non-profit subsectors would be different if all religious congregations and small organizations were required to report to the IRS, thereby being accounted for in national data trends for public charities.

### *Non-Profit Fundraising*

The sheer number and scope of non-profit organizations in the United States leads to an important consideration: how do public charities fund the programs and activities that fulfill their missions? The term itself—‘non-profit’—hints at the answer. Non-profit organizations differ from for-profit organizations since they are legally constrained from “distributing residual earnings to individuals who exercise control over the firm, such as officers, directors, or members.”<sup>20</sup> If a non-profit organization earns profits, it must designate any surplus funds to the continuing operation of the organization or distribute it

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>19</sup>Independent Sector, 2.

<sup>20</sup>The Urban Institute, “Frequently Asked Questions,” <http://www.nccs.urban.org/resources/faq.cfm> (accessed September 17, 2007).

to non-controlling persons, such as distributing grocery money to single mothers in an impoverished neighborhood.

Thus non-profit organizations must rely on outside sources to build the capacity of their organization. For the public charities that report to the IRS, fees for services and sales of goods account for the majority of revenue (71 percent).<sup>21</sup> This revenue includes items such as patient revenue at hospitals, tuition at universities, theater ticket sales and the sale of merchandise at museum gift shops. As mentioned previously, this huge portion of revenue is slightly deceiving since certain segments of the non-profit sector—namely healthcare and education—control such a significant portion of revenue and assets.

The majority of the remaining revenue earned by 501(c)(3) organizations comes from private contributions and government grants. Private contributions include those made by individuals, private foundations, charitable bequests and corporations/corporate foundations. Government grants include funding from federal, state and local governments.<sup>22</sup> A small portion of total revenue earned by the reporting public charities comes from dues/membership fees and the interest earned off investment funds such as endowments.<sup>23</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, the revenue of most interest will be private contributions, as these relate to the most basic and traditional communication model that involves sender-receiver message transmission.

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<sup>21</sup>The Urban Institute, “The Nonprofit Sector in Brief: Facts and Figures from the Nonprofit Almanac 2007,” 2.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

U.S. charitable giving reached a new high in 2006: an estimated \$295 billion was given to charitable causes. Researchers at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University annually research and write *Giving USA*, a yearbook of American philanthropy. *Giving USA 2007* reported that donations from individuals, the largest single source of funds, accounted for \$222.9 billion, or 75.6 percent of all estimated giving in 2006.<sup>24</sup> Of the remaining charitable donations, foundations gave 12.4 percent, charitable bequests (estate gifts) accounted for 7.8 percent and corporations gave 4.3 percent.<sup>25</sup> Charitable giving in 2006 represented the third straight year of growth, as donors gave nearly \$12 billion more than in 2005.<sup>26</sup>

Year-to-year comparisons must be put in context, though. An unusually large outpouring of gifts in 2005 was prompted by natural disasters, namely Hurricane Katrina and the Asian tsunamis. Disaster giving reached unprecedented levels: Americans donated \$7.4 billion to provide relief to victims in New Orleans, the Mississippi Gulf Coast and numerous Asian countries. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Red Cross clocked more than 1,000 online gifts per minute.<sup>27</sup> Since natural disasters do not occur with any predictable regularity, it is best not to allow disaster giving to skew the picture of overall giving. If the disaster relief giving is excluded from the 2005 totals,

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<sup>24</sup>Giving USA Foundation, "U.S. Charitable Giving Reaches \$295.05 Billion in 2006," 1. [http://www.aafrc.org/press\\_releases/gusa/20070625.pdf](http://www.aafrc.org/press_releases/gusa/20070625.pdf) (accessed September 8, 2007).

<sup>25</sup>Holly Hall, "A Record High," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, June 28, 2007.

<sup>26</sup>Giving USA Foundation, 1.

<sup>27</sup>Noelle Barton, Sam Kean, and Nicole Wallace, "Still Growing Strong," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, June 14, 2007.



then giving in 2006 rose 3.2 percent after adjusting for inflation.<sup>28</sup> This year-to-year comparison is best understood by leveling the playing field and eliminating natural disaster factors that skewed giving results.

Mega-gifts also skew the 2006 charitable giving results. Specifically, Warren Buffett's decision to pledge \$30 billion, the bulk of his investment fortune, to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation led the list of 22 wealthy Americans who made gifts of at least \$100 million to charity.<sup>29</sup> Despite the attention mega-gifts received from media, these unusually large donations only represented 1.3 percent of the total charitable giving in 2006.<sup>30</sup> In reality, average Americans who do not have enormous wealth to distribute also support charitable causes. The Indiana University researchers provide proper perspective for the giving climate and the overall generosity of the American people: "About 65 percent of households with incomes lower than \$100,000 give to charity. That is higher than the percentage who vote or read a Sunday paper."<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, the \$295 billion donated to charities in 2006 was amassed through a variety of non-profit fundraising activities. Just as the 1.4 million charities vary drastically in their size and scope, so do their fundraising mechanisms. Typical fundraising tactics include capital campaigns, telemarketing, direct mail campaigns, special events to raise funds, unrestricted or annual giving campaigns and corporate sponsorships. Non-profit fundraising is a niche unto itself, and the parameters of this

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Hall, "A Record High."

<sup>30</sup>Giving USA Foundation, 1.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 1-2.

thesis do not allow for lengthy elaboration on the technicalities of traditional fundraising tactics.

Just as tactics differ greatly, so do staff resources devoted to fundraising activities. Public charities with large budgets may employ development professionals to fundraise for the organization. Other mid-sized, mid-budget organizations might not be able to afford a full-time fundraiser, so instead they outsource occasional fundraising activities to development consulting firms. In smaller non-profit organizations, it is not uncommon for fundraising to fall under the job description of another staff member whose primary responsibility is to manage other aspects of the organization. For example, executive directors of non-profit organizations and church pastors often find themselves bearing sole responsibility for raising funds to support the mission and programs of their organization.

It is well known that non-profit organizations often face limited budgets and finite staff salary pools, which often necessitates such multi-tasking. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University have conducted ample research on trends in the non-profit sector, and their findings identify the frequent challenges non-profit organizations face in recruiting personnel: inability to offer competitive salaries, limited job advancement opportunities and inability to offer competitive benefits.<sup>32</sup>

### *The Internet*

Vice President Al Gore in the 1990s popularized the term ‘information superhighway’ to refer to the future of the Internet. Since that time, the explosion of the Internet as a medium defies all previous communication advancement history. According

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<sup>32</sup>Lester M. Salaman and Stephanie Lessans Geller, “The Nonprofit Workforce Crisis: Real or Imagined?” <http://www.jhu.edu/listeningpost/news/pdf/comm08.pdf> (accessed September 17, 2007).

to a 1998 report from the U.S. Department of Commerce: “The Internet’s pace of adoption eclipses all other technologies that preceded it. Radio was in existence 38 years before 50 million people tuned in; TV took 13 years to reach that benchmark. Once it was opened to the general public, the Internet crossed that line in four years.”<sup>33</sup>

### *A Brief History of the Internet*

The Internet as it exists today emerged from a U.S. government project intended to prevent the then-Soviet Union from gaining an advantage on the U.S. in their space and satellite endeavors. When the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957, the U.S. government established the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) to bring together the brainpower of researchers at top universities and research institutions in an effort to partner with NASA and “regain technical superiority for the United States.”<sup>34</sup>

To maximize the brainpower of the researchers, it became evident that a sharing mechanism was needed to allow researchers in different geographic locations to share information, ideas and research findings. In 1969, ARPANET was born when four interface message processors linked the computers at the Stanford Research Institute, UC-Santa Barbara, UCLA and the University of Utah.<sup>35</sup> ARPANET was the first peer-

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<sup>33</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce, *The Emerging Digital Economy*, part of President Clinton’s Framework for Global Electronic Commerce, 1998, <http://www.technology.gov/digeconomy/emerging.htm> (accessed September 7, 2007).

<sup>34</sup>Federal Communications Commission, “The Internet: A Short History of Getting Connected,” <http://www.fcc.gov/omd/history/internet/> (accessed September 16, 2007).

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

to-peer network that connected computer users from different geographic locations, and from ARPANET eventually emerged the Internet.

Although originally intended as a communication mechanism for U.S. government entities to gain advantage in the nuclear arms race, the potential was limitless for ARPANET to transition to a communication medium between people throughout the entire world. Eventually, the National Science Foundation took over the funding and responsibility for the civilian components of the ARPANET, which when hooked up to a faster infrastructure and the nation's supercomputers, increasingly became known as the Internet.<sup>36</sup> In 1991, all restrictions on the commercial use of the Internet were lifted, and in 1995, the private sector assumed responsibility for maintaining the Internet backbone, gaining full access to what is now considered the modern-day Internet.

#### *The Internet as it Exists Today*

Although the private sector has only been using the Internet for little more than a decade, the medium has undergone drastic improvements. At the dawn of Internet usage by the general public, Internet access was limited to 56 kbps (kilobits per second) modems operating over public phone lines,<sup>37</sup> a data capacity that did not allow for very fast transmission of information over the Internet. Broadband access was introduced in the United States in 1996, which significantly improved Internet speed by transmitting information using a high-speed cable modem. The 2007 USC-Annenberg Digital Future Project found that use of telephone modems to access the Internet has declined as use of

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

broadband connections has increased. In 2007, 50 percent of users accessed the Internet using a broadband connection, while only 45.6 percent of users went online using a telephone modem.<sup>38</sup>

As the Internet has improved, so have communication components of the medium. E-mail is one component that is utilized by nearly all Internet users: nearly nine out of 10 adults in 2007 who used the Internet did so to send or receive e-mail.<sup>39</sup> A recent *USA Today* article estimated that nearly 97 billion e-mails are sent each day, a truly astonishing fact.<sup>40</sup> E-mail fulfills many purposes, from communicating in business settings to chatting with friends and family, and e-mail is a key functionality that has contributed to the proliferation of Internet use.

The Internet is quickly growing and evolving as an instrument for personal engagement. Recent innovations give the term “virtual community” new meaning, as the Internet is expanding to include online communities of people. The Digital Future Project defines an online community as a “group that shares thoughts or ideas, or works on common projects, through electronic communication only.”<sup>41</sup> MySpace.com, perhaps the best-known online community today, is the world’s largest social networking portal. MySpace.com attracted more than 114 million global visitors age 15 and older in June

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<sup>38</sup>University of Southern California, Center for the Digital Future, “Highlights: 2007 USC-Annenberg Digital Future Project,” 1, <http://www.digitalcenter.org/pdf/2007-Digital-Future-Report-Press-Release-112906.pdf> (accessed September 16, 2007).

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Top 25 Things that Shaped the Internet: 25 Years of Paving the Information Superhighway, *USA Today*, April 30, 2007, <http://www.usatoday.com/tech/top25-internet.htm> (accessed September 16, 2007).

<sup>41</sup>University of Southern California, Center for the Digital Future, “Highlights: 2007,” 2.

2007.<sup>42</sup> Facebook.com, a similar social networking Web site that caters to the university and college community, experienced dramatic growth in the past year, jumping 270 percent to 52.2 million visitors.<sup>43</sup>

Just as social networking Web sites encourage two-way communication between the Internet and its audience, so do online video sites. Video Web sites exist in various formats, from sports television clips posted by ESPN.com to video-sharing sites such as YouTube.com that allow users to upload video clips and share them with others.

YouTube.com made headlines in 2006 when Google purchased the video-sharing site for \$1.65 billion.<sup>44</sup> Given the hefty purchase price (and implied value) of YouTube, it is not surprising that online video sites comprise a significant portion of Internet use. In July 2007, nearly 75 percent of U.S. Internet users watched an average of three hours of online video during the month.<sup>45</sup>

Without question, the Internet has emerged as a multi-faceted medium that has evolved as a legitimate means of personally engaging audiences. Myriad components of the Internet are too numerous to list. Examples range from the booming business found on Internet auction sites such as eBay.com and online retail stores like Amazon.com to the explosion of online weblogs ('blogs') and instant messaging programs. For the purposes of this thesis, it is unnecessary to elaborate on all the components of the

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<sup>42</sup>ComScore, "Social Networking Goes Global," <http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=1555> (accessed September 16, 2007).

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Top 25 Things.

<sup>45</sup>ComScore, "U.S. Viewers Watched an Average of 3 Hours of Online Video in July," <http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=1678> (accessed September 16, 2007).

Internet, but suffice to say that the Internet has facilitated an information explosion unlike any other in communication history. Allison Fine, an author who has written about technology and social change, emphasizes that social media “are important not for their wizardry, but because they are inexpensive and easy to use and they allow individuals and small groups to bring about big changes. Connectedness does not come from technology, but is facilitated and strengthened by it.”<sup>46</sup>

### *Computer and Internet Usage in the United States*

Since the last U.S. Census data that is available was gathered in 2000, official statistics regarding the nation’s Internet usage do not accurately reflect the medium’s explosion in the seven years since the data was amassed. That said, the U.S. Census Bureau published a report based on the 2003 Current Population Survey that examined the characteristics of households and people who have and have not adopted use of computers and the Internet.

In 2003, 70 million American households had one or more computers.<sup>47</sup> This number represented 62 percent of the U.S. population, up from 56 percent in 2001. For perspective, in 1984 only 8 percent of households owned a computer.<sup>48</sup> In 2003, 62 million households (55 percent) had Internet access, more than triple the proportion with Internet access in 1997.

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<sup>46</sup>Allison H. Fine, “Social Change and the Connected Age,” *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, November 9, 2006.

<sup>47</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2003,” 1, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p23-208.pdf> (accessed September 16, 2007).

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

Although computer and Internet usage has been widely adopted, the Census Bureau report did indicate lower adoption rates among certain socioeconomic and demographic groups. For example, only 35 percent of households with persons aged 65 or older and 45 percent of Black and Hispanic households had a computer.<sup>49</sup>

Researchers in the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California surveyed more than 2,000 individuals across the U.S. to assess the current state of the Internet in 2007. Although the USC Digital Future Project employed a much smaller sample than the Census Bureau's 2003 study—2,000 individuals compared to 113,000 households—the research results are still beneficial for providing a snapshot of current Internet usage in the nation.

In 2007, more than three-quarters—77.6 percent—of Americans age 12 and older go online.<sup>50</sup> The number of hours Americans spend on the Internet continues to increase, an average of 8.9 hours spent online per week.<sup>51</sup> One of the study's most interesting findings relates to the idea that Internet users' virtual worlds are colliding with their real world. Of Internet users who are members of online communities, 43 percent say that they “feel as strongly” about their virtual community as they do about their real-world communities.<sup>52</sup> This finding implies that communication on the Internet has become so

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>50</sup>University of Southern California, Center for the Digital Future, “Highlights: 2007,” 1.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>University of Southern California, Center for the Digital Future, “Online World As Important to Internet Users as Real World?” <http://www.digitalcenter.org/pdf/2007-Digital-Future-Report-Press-Release-112906.pdf> (accessed September 16, 2007).



entrenched in peoples' lives that it has significant power to personally engage an audience in its messages and inspire offline action.

### *Non-Profit Organizations and the Internet*

The Internet is perhaps the most dynamic of all media in history. The medium is constantly evolving as new facets are being introduced. If public charities wish to engage audiences in the 21st century, then the communication tactics and strategies utilized by non-profit organizations must adapt to this ever-changing, dynamic medium. USC's Digital Future Project consistently finds that the vast majority of Internet users consider it an important source of information and entertainment, consistently outranking television.<sup>53</sup> If the Internet outranks television as an information source, have non-profit organizations shifted their communication strategies to focus more on this increasingly important medium?

### *Non-Profit Web Sites*

How has information technology been employed by the 501(c)(3) sector? Unfortunately, basic statistics are lacking in this area. Given the dynamic nature of the Internet, it is not surprising that an abundance of reliable data does not exist to quantify the number of non-profit organizations that have a Web presence.

The Princeton Survey Research Associates in 2001 published findings about organizations' adoption of information technology, however the study focused on only one subsector of public charities, human service organizations. Executives from more than 200 human service organizations were surveyed to assess the prominence of

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<sup>53</sup>University of Southern California, Center for the Digital Future, "Highlights: 2007," 2.

emerging information technology in the organizations. It was found that a majority of the executives believed improvements in their organization's information technology would not only improve their day-to-day efficiency, but also would enhance their profile and presence in the community and improve communication with staff and constituents.<sup>54</sup> Approximately half (49 percent) of the human services organizations had a Web site. Large non-profits (63 percent) were much more likely to have a Web presence than small non-profits (39 percent), an inherent result of the bigger budget and larger staff size often found at larger organizations. In fact, large non-profit organizations generally had adopted all forms of information technology more than their smaller counterparts.

The organizations that had a Web presence most often used their Web sites to help explain their missions and to help carry out their programs and missions.<sup>55</sup> Of the organizations that did not have Web sites, numerous reasons were given as to why not: they did not need one; they had more important priorities; and the cost and lack of staff prevented their organization from having a Web site.<sup>56</sup> Although this 2001 study provides a relevant history of human service organizations' adoption of new technology, it is not prudent to attempt to discern how these results apply to the entire non-profit sector in 2007. No doubt it would benefit communication researchers and non-profit researchers alike to have access to current data quantifying the Web presence of all organizations in the non-profit sector.

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<sup>54</sup>Princeton Survey Research Associates, "Wired, Willing and Ready: Nonprofit Human Service Organizations' Adoption of Information Technology," 3, <http://www.independentsector.org/PDFs/WiredWillingReady.pdf> (accessed September 3, 2007).

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 10.

### *Online Giving*

Improvements in Internet technology have opened a new world of possibility for non-profit development. The ability to engage in online fundraising is one major incentive for non-profits to establish a Web site for their organization. When e-commerce functionality was developed, it not only allowed businesses to sell products and services via the Internet, it also provided non-profit organizations the ability to raise money online. With the help of secure Internet servers, financial transactions—whether buying new shoes or donating money to charity—are now possible using a credit card or electronic funds transfer without every leaving the comfort of one's home.

Recent studies suggest that non-profit organizations are increasingly successful at raising donations online. The September 2007 Philanthropic Giving Index survey indicated that 34.4 percent of non-profits reported success with Internet fundraising, the average size online gift being \$150.<sup>57</sup> Nearly half of the fundraisers surveyed estimated that online donations account for only 1 to 5 percent of the non-profit organization's total contributions. Interestingly, 23 percent of organizations did not receive any donations online, but 13 percent received more than half of their donations online.<sup>58</sup> No theory was given as to why such a discrepancy existed among those surveyed, but it is possible that the reason lies in the emphasis each organization placed on fundraising online. If one organization's Web site did not contain functionality to facilitate online gifts, then naturally it would fall in the 23 percent that received no online

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<sup>57</sup> Adriene Davis and Josh Sprunger, "Nonprofits' Success with Online Giving Options Growing Steadily, Fundraisers Say," September 11, 2007, <http://www.philanthropy.iupui.edu/News/2007/pr-online-giving.aspx> (accessed September 16, 2007).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

gifts. If another organization produced as many e-solicitations as it did direct mail solicitations, then it is quite possible that half of its gifts would come via the Internet. Although there is a strong upward trend in Internet fundraising, the average online contribution remains relatively small and online giving accounts for only a small portion of all fundraising. Timothy L. Seiler of The Fund Raising School at the Center on Philanthropy interpreted the survey results: “This indicates that online giving offers donors additional, convenient ways to make their contributions but it is not replacing other, more conventional fundraising and giving strategies.”<sup>59</sup>

The *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, a trusted trade publication for the non-profit sector, recently released survey results analyzing the online-giving data of some of the nation’s largest charities. Electronic gifts to the 187 organizations grew by 37 percent from 2005 to 2006, with \$1.2 billion raised online.<sup>60</sup> Since the survey sample consisted of the nation’s charities that raise the most money from private sources, it is not surprising that several organizations received significant totals through online gifts. Fifteen organizations raised \$10 million or more online, and four groups amassed amounts much larger than that: the American Red Cross, United Way of America, the American Cancer Society and the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society raised \$464 million, \$240 million, \$58 million and \$45 million, respectively.<sup>61</sup> However, 24 organizations did not raise any money online in 2006, which indicates that some of the nation’s largest charities are raising significant sums without the use of the Internet. Ultimately, the

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Barton, Kean, and Wallace, “Still Growing Strong.”

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

*Chronicle's* survey results echoed the findings of The Center on Philanthropy: despite significant growth that many non-profit organizations have experienced in their online fundraising, it still accounts for a very small portion of overall giving.

*Online Donations: Result of Fundraising or Simply a Convenient Way to Donate?*

The upward trend in online giving introduces a curious aspect to consider: do organizations attempt to differentiate between gifts that resulted from solicitations and those that may have been given simply because donating online is convenient? Heifer International, a non-profit organization whose mission is to “work with communities to end hunger and poverty and to care for the earth,”<sup>62</sup> perfectly illustrates this question. Heifer’s strategy to fulfill its mission is to “pass on the gift” by providing food and income-producing livestock to people in poor countries, giving families a source of food and income rather than short-term relief. The organization’s namesake, a Heifer cow, can be given to a poor family, providing them milk to nourish their children. The nourished children can then attend school and educate themselves for a better future. The Heifer’s surplus milk can be sold by the family to help pay for clothing, shelter and medicine. Heifer International also gives poor families numerous other animals—sheep, chicks, llama, geese, pigs and honeybees to name a few—that produce milk, eggs, wool and meat, all of which help these families sustain themselves.<sup>63</sup> Heifer’s strategy to “pass on the gift” also is evident in the organization’s requirement that those who receive its animals are required to share the first offspring with other families in need, thus

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<sup>62</sup>Heifer International, “Heifer’s Mission to End Hunger,” <http://www.heifer.org/site/c.edJRKQNiFiG/b.201465/> (accessed September 20, 2007).

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

magnifying the effect of the original gift and providing relief to even more needy families.<sup>64</sup>

In recent years, Heifer International has received abundant media attention. Bill Clinton's Presidential Library is located next door to the world headquarters of Heifer International in Little Rock, Ark., and the former president and his wife, New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, are very vocal supporters of the organization. In addition to speaking at various events hosted by the organization, Clinton devoted an entire chapter of his 2007 book, *Giving*, to profiling Heifer International. The Clintons are not the only public figures and celebrities to endorse Heifer's work. President Jimmy Carter, legendary newsman Walter Cronkite, and actors Ted Danson and Susan Sarandon are among Heifer's notable supporters.<sup>65</sup> Oprah Winfrey, perhaps one of the most influential people in America, starting in 2005 featured Heifer International's projects on her television show, in her magazine and on her Web site.

Considering the generous publicity and celebrity endorsements Heifer International has received, it is not surprising that donations to the organization have increased considerably. President Clinton himself even acknowledged the power of positive publicity for Heifer: "In 2006, contributions reached \$80 million, thanks to good publicity, celebrity support, effective marketing, and energetic and visionary leadership."<sup>66</sup> In fact, Heifer's online contributions increased by 38 percent in just one

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<sup>64</sup>Bill Clinton, *Giving: How Each of Us Can Change the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Random House, Inc., 2007), 110.

<sup>65</sup>Heifer International, "Notable Quotes," <http://www.heifer.org/site/c.edJRKQNiFiG/b.201503/> (accessed September 20, 2007).

<sup>66</sup>Clinton, 113.

year: the organization's online fundraising jumped from \$14.1 million in 2005 to \$19.5 million in 2006.<sup>67</sup>

One must wonder: did Heifer experience such dramatic growth in online gifts due to specific online solicitations or was it a result of increased publicity of the organization as a whole? In other words, did donors seek Heifer International rather than Heifer International seek donors?

The example of Heifer International illustrates a quandary non-profit organizations face when analyzing the effectiveness of their online fundraising. Various mechanisms exist to track and quantify the effectiveness of an organization's online communications, but not all organizations have the Web site functionality and staff time to devote to such analysis. Some organizations create specific landing pages that can only be accessed by individuals who click on a link in an e-solicitation. The landing page is essentially hidden from the front-end of the Web site, i.e., there are no links or ways to navigate to the page without clicking on the link in the e-mail. If an online gift is made from this landing page, then a non-profit organization can deduce that it was a result of the effectiveness of that particular e-solicitation.

Other mechanisms exist to track the effectiveness of online communication, but for the purposes of this thesis, the important point is that non-profit organizations differ considerably in how they differentiate online gifts and why these gifts originated in the first place. In truth, this aspect and specificity in analyzing online gifts for the non-profit sector as a whole is likely years from fruition. As it stands in 2007, the non-profit sector is aware that online gifts are on the rise due to a combination of various factors—

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<sup>67</sup>Barton, Kean, and Wallace, "Still Growing Strong."

increased online solicitations, ease and convenience of making online gifts, and most importantly, fully integrating the Internet in the organization's overall marketing and communications strategy.

### *Integrating the Internet in Non-Profit Marketing Strategy*

While online charitable giving is on the rise, it certainly did not happen through non-profit organizations simply adding online donation functionality to their Web sites. In reality, to introduce a new medium for charitable giving, non-profit organizations must integrate it throughout their marketing and communication plans.

Beyond the obvious first step of creating the functionality that allows a non-profit's Web site to accept donations, organizations then must promote the idea of donating online to the charity. Common tactics include placing a donation button or link on the charity's main landing page, including an online giving link in e-mails sent by the organization to constituents, and mentioning the online giving site in non-electronic materials, such as newsletters and direct mail. Studies suggest that a majority of non-profit organizations are utilizing such tactics to promote online gifts. Nearly 80 percent of organizations communicate with constituents by sending e-mail, and a large majority of non-profits also provide an opportunity to donate in the organization's e-mails to constituents.<sup>68</sup>

To truly integrate their communication and marketing strategies, non-profit organizations increasingly are using the Internet in tandem with other media. An example is the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker organization

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<sup>68</sup>Davis and Sprunger, "Nonprofits' Success."



focused on service, development, social justice and peace programs. The AFSC strives for its postal appeals, e-mail newsletters, online solicitations and magazine to all tell the same story.<sup>69</sup> To accomplish this, the online communications team and the direct mail team hold joint planning meetings to ensure that their constituents hear from the organization in an organized fashion, that is, individuals hear from AFSC via e-mail and postal mail in a manner that does not overwhelm the audience.

Some organizations create fundraising campaigns that combine both online appeals and direct mail. At Save the Children, individual revenue goals are set for direct-mail campaigns and online campaigns, but the organization also set a goal to raise \$390,000 through a combination of the two solicitations. Not only did it reach its goal nearly five months before the fiscal year ended, it also discovered their productivity increased. Explained Brian Sobelman of Save the Children: “When you have collaboration and cooperation among departments, you usually get better results than when you have competition.”<sup>70</sup>

It would be foolish to assume that all constituents are interested in the same things, and non-profit organizations that realize this are tailoring their appeals to individual interests. The Humane Society of the United States analyzed its e-mail database of 900,000 individuals by tracking which e-mail messages were opened, which appeals prompted donations and which links were clicked on by readers. The organization then created four groups based on individual interests, such as ending horse slaughter, animal fighting or seal hunting. Which of the four e-mails each recipient

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<sup>69</sup>Barton, Kean, and Wallace, “Still Growing Strong.”

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

received was determined by their previous interest. The Humane Society discovered that the people who received issue-specific appeals were more likely to make a donation. “If you have a file of people who have a multiplicity of interests, it makes sense to tailor your communication based on either their past behaviors or what they’ve told you they’re interested in,” noted Geoff Handy, the Humane Society’s vice president for media and online communications.<sup>71</sup>

One of the most successful and widely implemented tactics of non-profit organizations has been to incorporate the Internet into other types of fundraising activities. A large number of health-focused organizations host fundraising walks, bike-a-thons and golf tournaments to raise awareness of and fund research on specific diseases, such as the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, the Alzheimer’s Association Memory Walk and the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society’s Team in Training program. The underlying fundraising tactic that has been used for decades by such organizations is to recruit participants for the event who in turn raise money among friends and family to support them in the race/bike-a-thon/etc. The ease and reach of the Internet has allowed participants to collect more gifts from more people.<sup>72</sup> For example, a participant in the Alzheimer’s Association Memory Walk might sign up to walk because she is inspired by her own grandmother’s struggle with the disease. The Alzheimer Association’s Internet Web site contains functionality that allows this individual to create her own personal Web page explaining why she is participating in the event. With just a few clicks, she can send a personalized e-mail (the template and suggested copy provided to her by the

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

Web site) to everyone in her personal e-mail address book asking them for a donation to support her in the Memory Walk. And with just a few clicks themselves, her family and friends can make an online donation to support their loved one. Web sites such as the one described above often feature giving thermometers that track how close a participant is to reaching his/her fundraising goal and provide the capability to upload personal photos—such as a photo of this individual and her Alzheimer’s-stricken grandmother.

Integrating the Internet in fundraising activities allows the organization and event participants to reach far more potential supporters than was previously realistic with just the telephone and postal mail. The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society’s Team in Training program consists of various events—marathons, triathlons and 100-mile bike races—to raise funds for cancer research. In 2006, people who participated in these events raised \$110 million, more than \$34 million of which came in online.<sup>73</sup>

One of the most important aspects to realize here is that the Internet is exponentially spreading the message of non-profit organizations. If a Team in Training participant receives 20 online gifts from his friends and family, then those 20 individuals all visited the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society’s Web site to make their gift. That translates to 20 individuals who potentially spent time exploring the Society’s Web site and learning more about the organization’s mission, goals and programs. By harnessing the power of the Internet to ease the process of raising funds for special events, something that these organizations were already doing, they also are unleashing the potential to reach a vast new audience.

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

## *Telling the Story of Marginalized Voices*

The focus of this thesis is how non-profit organizations are using the Internet to tell the personal stories of those they help. The sheer number and scope of non-profit organizations in America translates into millions upon millions of individual people whose lives are enriched by the good works and deeds of public charities. Who are these people? They are battered women in Chicago, refugees in the Darfur region of Sudan, impoverished farmers in the Dominican Republic and pediatric cancer patients in Houston. The list goes on and on. Certainly not all non-profit organizations aim to benefit humans directly. Myriad other causes exist: protecting rainforests in Belize, providing shelter to stray dogs and cats in Los Angeles, cleaning up public parks in Boston. Regardless of their specific cause, all non-profit organizations have a mission to improve society in some way.

Non-profit organizations have traditionally utilized personal testimonials to market the organization and its mission. Various media are employed to showcase the good works of public charities. Direct mail letters feature stories and photos of a child in Africa who is thriving with the help of American donations. Non-profit organizations' annual reports often include personal testimonials from one or two individuals who received assistance from the charity. If a television show or news outlet contacts a non-profit organization for a story, the organization's public relations staff might direct the media outlet to interview a person whose life was enriched by the organization's support. These are all tried-and-true methods that non-profit organizations use to illustrate to an audience that the organization is truly making a difference in society.

So how are non-profit organizations incorporating personal testimonials in the newest medium, the Internet? One outstanding example is found at Care.org, the Web site for CARE International, a leading humanitarian organization fighting global poverty by tackling the underlying causes of it so people can become self-sufficient. The organization's Web site explains:

Recognizing that women and children suffer disproportionately from poverty, CARE places special emphasis on working with women to create permanent social change. Women are at the heart of CARE's community-based efforts to improve basic education, prevent the spread of HIV, increase access to clean water and sanitation, expand economic opportunity and protect natural resources. CARE also delivers emergency aid to survivors of war and natural disasters, and helps people rebuild their lives.<sup>74</sup>

A visitor to CARE's Web site is immediately given a glimpse into the lives of dozens of women and girls who have been aided by CARE's programs to fight global poverty. On its main home page, CARE provides numerous links to personal stories of women around the world.

There is the story of Abay, an Ethiopian women who, at the age of eight, refused to undergo her tribe's ancient practice of female genital cutting.<sup>75</sup> As a grown woman, Abay returned to her tribe and led efforts to shed light on the harmful practice of female genital cutting, eventually putting an end to the ceremony that Abay's tribe had performed on young girls for centuries. Abay's story is presented in a six-minute Flash presentation filled with vivid photographs and narrated by world-renowned photographer Phil Borges.

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<sup>74</sup>CARE International, "About CARE," <http://www.care.org/about/index.asp?> (accessed September 6, 2007).

<sup>75</sup>CARE International, "One Woman's Story of Empowerment," <http://www.care.org/features/flash/fgc/index.asp> (accessed September 8, 2007).

CARE's "I Am Powerful" campaign has a goal to help poor women throughout the world build a better future. The campaign is promoted through the use of another compelling Flash presentation that features sharp, stirring photographs of women around the world, showing how their lives are improved with the proper tools, knowledge and opportunity. Haunting music provides a backdrop for the presentation, which ends with the words, "She has the power to change her world. You have the power to help her do it."<sup>76</sup>

CARE's Web site features dozens of other anecdotes showing the impact CARE has on reducing global poverty by empowering women and children. There are photo galleries, short text explanations and Flash presentations that illustrate CARE's programs benefiting undernourished children and pregnant women in Malawi, refugees in Darfur and education initiatives in Egypt and Cambodia.

The CARE Web site is so much more than what some consider to be the standard for non-profit Web sites: a "typical brochure site with nothing more than a mission statement, contact information and zero interactivity."<sup>77</sup> In contrast, CARE.org allows individuals to learn more about CARE's programs by showing, not telling, the audience what a significant impact they are having in reducing global poverty.

CARE International is one of many non-profits that is finding new and interactive ways to engage audiences. Heartspring, a worldwide center for children with special needs, created its Web site in response to the "organization's commitment to use

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<sup>76</sup>CARE International, "I Am Powerful," <http://www.care.org/getinvolved/iampowerful/intro.asp> (accessed September 8, 2007).

<sup>77</sup>Natalie Ghidotti and Mark Hrywna, "Turbo-Charged Web Use," *NonProfit Times*, April 1, 2007, <http://www.nptimes.com/07Apr/npt-070401-1.html> (accessed September 18, 2007).

technology in innovative ways to promote global awareness of children with disabilities.”<sup>78</sup> Heartspring.org has an online video gallery that features students, clients, parents, physicians and staff.<sup>79</sup> According to Heartspring staff, the emotional videos are some of the site’s most popular features. “We wanted people to truly experience our successful outcomes,” noted Kristina M. Baker, coordinator of outreach programs for Heartspring.<sup>80</sup> Since launching its new site, the organization has received significantly more exposure: Heartspring.org’s daily hits have grown from an average of 1,000 to 9,000.<sup>81</sup>

Other non-profit organizations are allowing their Web site’s users to tell emotional stories about the importance of the organization’s mission and programs. The American Cancer Society in 2005 and 2006 underwent a total rebuild of its Web site, a process that took 15 months. In March 2007, the Society launched a Web-based version of its Relay for Life events, one component of which allows users to create their own blogs and connect with each other online. “The amount of real, passionate stories on their blogs has been overwhelming to us,” explained Adam Pellegrini, strategic online director for the American Cancer Society. “It’s becoming a collection of users’ most passionate stories. Community mobilization is one of the goals of the Cancer Society. Social networking is one extremely powerful way to mobilize communities online.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Heartspring, “Resources,” <http://www.heartspring.org/resources/video/> (accessed September 20, 2007).

<sup>80</sup>Ghidotti and Hrywna, “Turbo-Charged Web Use.”

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

It is clear that several non-profit organizations are utilizing Internet functionality to tug at their audience's heartstrings. The Internet is unique as a medium in that it has the ability to communicate to multiple senses that cannot be reached by more traditional media. In contrast to direct mail that can only use written words and pictures to tell a story, the Internet can stimulate an audience's vision and hearing through the use of words both spoken and written, photographs, video and music. Atul Tandon oversees donor engagement at World Vision, a relief organization that raised more than \$37 million online last year, a 2,000 percent increase in the past five years. "When you have 800,000 e-mail addresses, you can communicate at a very low cost," he said. His belief is that the emotion contained in interactive online communications is what motivates people to donate, and many donors find online communications far more compelling than mass postal mailings: "Frankly, it excites them. You're not just looking at a piece of direct mail. On e-mail you can have video available, you have audio, you're listening to a child in Uganda or a soldier in the Congo."<sup>83</sup>

Non-profit marketers and communication professionals are utilizing their Web sites to engage audiences in new, interactive ways that were not possible before the introduction of the Internet as a mass communication tool. Oprah Winfrey uses her media empire to promote philanthropy by Americans, something that she has personally embraced by giving away significant amounts of her vast fortune. She advises her audience to support causes that they connect with emotionally: "You should choose based upon what speaks to your heart so that it's not just a check that you're writing. That you literally are making a spiritual connection, and the spiritual connection will be felt

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<sup>83</sup>Barton, Kean, and Wallace, "Still Growing Strong."



wherever it is you're sending the money to.”<sup>84</sup> For many non-profit organizations, their programs and outreach have the capacity to change lives. In some cases, non-profits provide relief and support that quite literally saves lives. This thesis will examine how non-profit organizations are using the Internet to portray the personal stories of the people and groups that their organizations serve.

### *Purpose*

Non-profit organizations must find ways to communicate to their publics about the organization's mission, programs, funding needs and philanthropy. Given the tight budgets and funding constraints that many non-profits endure, the Internet presents significant potential for an organization to communicate to its publics at relatively little expense. A significant non-profit postal rate hike of 6.7 percent in 2007<sup>85</sup> left many non-profit organizations searching for alternative ways to disseminate messages to their target audience. As the latest and most revolutionary mass communication medium, the Internet provides an excellent tool for a non-profit to strengthen the relationship with its publics and publicize the organization's good works.

This thesis examines how non-profit organizations utilize the Internet to facilitate relationships with key stakeholders. Specifically, whether non-profit Web sites prominently feature stories that illustrate the good deeds and acts of charity carried out by the organization. Variables of interest include prominence of good works stories, how

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<sup>84</sup>The Oprah Winfrey Show, “How You Can Help Women and Children Around the World,” [http://www.oprah.com/tows/slide/200706/20070605/slide\\_20070605\\_350\\_203.jhtml](http://www.oprah.com/tows/slide/200706/20070605/slide_20070605_350_203.jhtml) (accessed September 20, 2007).

<sup>85</sup>Mark Hrywna, “Postal Hikes Looming: Some Increases Hit May 14, Others July 15,” *NonProfit Times*, April 1, 2007, <http://www.nptimes.com/07Apr/npt-070401-2.html> (accessed September 26, 2007).

the story content is framed, and the synergy of good works stories with a specific call to action. This study differs from other studies in that it examines how non-profits spotlight their own philanthropy via the World Wide Web, a facet of public relations often overlooked in studies of charitable organizations and their adoption of Internet technology. The content analysis examines how public charities frame themselves; that is, how non-profit organizations make their causes more salient in the way they portray good works stories to stakeholders via the World Wide Web.

This thesis adds considerably to the existing literature in that it examines an aspect of non-profit Web sites that previously has not been studied. Non-profit organizations exist for one purpose: to improve some segment of society through their acts of charity. Unlike for-profit corporations and businesses, non-profits do not acquire and retain financial profits for benefit of executives and shareholders. A non-profit organization's success is measured not by the size of its bank account, but instead by the amount of good it performs in society. This thesis explores the extent to which non-profits utilize the Internet to illustrate to their publics how they are benefiting society.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

There is no shortage of data quantifying the non-profit sector, the Internet and the adoption of Internet technology by non-profit organizations. However, there is little empirical research regarding non-profit organizations and the effectiveness of their online communications, and most specifically, how non-profits are using the Internet to portray the personal stories of the people and groups that the organization serves.

This chapter explores previous research that relates to this topic, including the interactivity and dialogic functions of Web sites; the public relations goal of engaging key stakeholders; and the Web space allotted to telling the stories of marginalized voices. The following review of literature demonstrates how the present study fits into previous scholarship, while also identifying the need for further research in this area.

#### *Early Theories as They Relate to the Internet*

Marshall McLuhan was one of the more controversial and influential communication scholars of his day, and now more than four decades later, his theories have proven to be far ahead of his time. McLuhan coined the expression “the medium is the message,”<sup>86</sup> implying that the most important component of a communication message is not actually the content, but rather the medium via which it is delivered. The concept that the medium is the message certainly applies to the Internet, but even more

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<sup>86</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 2.

fitting is McLuhan's theory that electronic media create a "global village,"<sup>87</sup> enabling millions of people from around the world to communicate on a global scale. Although McLuhan's description originally related to older electronic media (television in particular), the notion of a global village has only become more of a reality with the advent of the Internet. His writings may have preceded online communication, but his theories pointed current scholarship in a fruitful direction.

Gatekeeping, outlined by Kurt Lewin in 1947, is one of the most important and basic concepts underlying communication theory. In its broadest sense, gatekeeping is the filtering process through which ideas pass before dissemination. More specifically, traditional media are considered gatekeepers because they decide what information to relay or withhold from an audience (i.e., newspaper editors and television news producers control the flow of information to audiences.) But the Internet is a unique medium because it exists in the public domain; organizations' Web sites are free of restrictions and censorship by media gatekeepers. This characteristic of a Web site to circumvent gatekeepers is one of its most heralded features. Esrock and Leichty suggested that Web sites serve audiences that more actively seek information, as opposed to the passive audiences of traditional media.<sup>88</sup> "One can design messages that are unencumbered by temporal restrictions or the dictates of gatekeepers in print and electronic journalism," the researchers noted. "Hence, WWW pages offer corporations an opportunity to participate

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Stuart L. Esrock and Greg B. Leichty, "Social Responsibility and Corporate Web Pages: Self Presentation or Agenda-Setting?" *Public Relations Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 306.

in ‘setting the agenda’ on public policy issues.”<sup>89</sup> While public relations practitioners often must pass through gatekeepers to disseminate their information in traditional media, Web sites allow an organization to bypass this step and appeal directly to its target audience.

### *Web Site Research in the For-Profit Sector*

Much of the research about online communication has focused on Web sites of corporate entities and businesses. In their study of *Fortune* 500 companies, Esrock and Leichty examined how large corporations used their Web sites to either present themselves as socially responsible citizens or to advocate for their own policy positions.<sup>90</sup> They found that corporations’ Web pages were primarily used to build the company’s image by disseminating corporate responsibility information. The researchers noted that, in 1998 when their study was conducted, very few corporate Web pages facilitated “meaningful two-way interaction between organizations and their publics.”<sup>91</sup>

Esrock and Leichty followed up their original study with another content analysis of *Fortune* 500 companies, this time to assess how corporate Web pages were being used to communicate with various constituencies.<sup>92</sup> They pointed out that Web pages present information to a presumably interested audience, and they provide the opportunity to

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 317.

<sup>92</sup>Stuart L. Esrock and Greg B. Leichty, “Corporate World Wide Web Pages: Serving the News Media and Other Publics,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 456-467.

engage in communication with a multiplicity of publics at the same time. Their findings indicated that corporations primarily used the Web to communicate with the news media, potential customers and the financial community/investors, but it was not being used to its fullest potential to communicate simultaneously with various constituencies through a single medium.

Suchitra Vattyam and Charles A. Lubbers also studied *Fortune* 500 companies to assess what functions their Web sites fulfilled.<sup>93</sup> A large majority (90 percent) of the corporations' Web pages contained news releases, company overviews, product listings and financial information, the ultimate goal being to promote their image, strengthen public relations and provide product and company information. The researchers noted that most sites did not contain multimedia features, i.e., the companies "seem to provide the consumers with a greater amount of interactivity *with* the medium than *through* the medium."<sup>94</sup>

Research focusing on for-profit Web sites preceded that of the non-profit sector, and some researchers took advantage of this to compare the Internet presence of the two sectors. Henika in her analysis proposed that non-profit organizations should look to large, for-profit entities for guidance in using a Web presence as an effective public relations tool.<sup>95</sup> Likewise, Esrock and Leichty acknowledged that they and others

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<sup>93</sup>Suchitra Vattyam and Charles A. Lubbers, "A Content Analysis of the Web Pages of Large U.S. Corporations: What is the Role of Public Relations and Marketing?" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, New Orleans, August 1999).

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*, emphasis added.

<sup>95</sup>Amy Henika, "Making the Web Work for Non-Profits: Recommendations for the Ronald McDonald House of Dallas," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, New Orleans, August 1999).

focused their research on corporate Web sites, thus future research is needed to examine how non-profit organizations are using the Internet.<sup>96</sup>

*The Web: An Essential Tool in Communicating to Key Stakeholders*

There is consensus among researchers that public relations and the Internet are inextricably linked given that organizations are using the medium in a multitude of ways to communicate to key stakeholders. A special issue of *Public Relations Review* in fall 1998 was dedicated to this topic, and the issue contained many of the seminal works of researchers that frequently have been cited since that time: Esrock and Leichty<sup>97</sup>; Kent and Taylor<sup>98</sup>; and Coombs.<sup>99</sup>

W. Timothy Coombs' research demonstrated that the Internet is a potential equalizer for activist organizations, able to be leveraged to improve the organization-stakeholder dynamic.<sup>100</sup> Activists traditionally have been seen as powerless groups, commanding less attention than other, more powerful stakeholders. Through case analyses, Coombs identified the Internet as a "low cost, direct, controllable communication channel for activists."<sup>101</sup> He also asserted that the directness of the

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<sup>96</sup>Esrock and Leichty, "Corporate World Wide Web," 465.

<sup>97</sup>Esrock and Leichty, "Social Responsibility," 305-319.

<sup>98</sup>Michael L. Kent and Maureen Taylor, "Building Dialogic Relationships Through the World Wide Web," *Public Relations Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 321-334.

<sup>99</sup>W. Timothy Coombs, "The Internet as Potential Equalizer: New Leverage for Confronting Social Irresponsibility," *Public Relations Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 289-303.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 299.

medium is particularly beneficial for activist groups since there is no intermediary needed to deliver the message, i.e., a gatekeeper.

Michael Kent, Maureen Taylor and, later, William White collaborated on several important studies that add to the existing body of literature about the Internet and how organizations use the World Wide Web to build relationships with their publics. In their 1998 article, Kent and Taylor operationalized five principles for organizations to follow in facilitating relationships with publics through the Internet. Web sites should offer: 1) dialogic loops—site should allow publics to query the organization, which then responds to questions asked by publics; 2) useful information relevant to a variety of publics—address the interests, values and concerns of the audience; 3) generation of return visits—features that make the site attractive for repeat visits; 4) ease of the interface—site should be easy to navigate and understand; and 5) conservation of visitors—careful use of hyperlinks to avoid leading visitors away from the organization’s site.<sup>102</sup> This research articulated a theoretical framework of dialogic communication, and it has served as a basis for much subsequent research regarding relationship building via the World Wide Web.

Taylor, Kent and White furthered this line of thinking by examining activist organizations’ communication efforts in using Web sites to strengthen relationships with publics.<sup>103</sup> The researchers conducted content analysis of 100 environmental organization Web sites to determine how well they facilitate dialogue that builds organization-public relationships. Relationships built via the Internet create new hurdles

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<sup>102</sup>Kent and Taylor, 326-331.

<sup>103</sup>Maureen Taylor, Michael L. Kent, and William J. White, “How Activist Organizations are Using the Internet to Build Relationships,” *Public Relations Review* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 263-284.



for public relations practitioners since the medium is a place where “previously unrelated publics can come together for a social or activist cause.”<sup>104</sup> Results showed that activist organizations had embraced the *technical* side of relationship building—ease of interface, content featuring useful information and visitor retention—but the Web sites did not facilitate relationship building. Namely, the environmental organizations did not fully utilize the Internet’s dialogic capacity by encouraging return site visitors and incorporating a dialogic feedback loop.<sup>105</sup> Additionally, these activist organizations did not take advantage of their sites to mobilize publics in meeting the organization’s policy goals, such as telling site visitors how to contact public leaders regarding environmental issues. In what was one of the first studies of non-profits’ use of the Web to build relationships, the researchers determined that organizations were not yet fully engaging in two-way communication with their publics.

Two years later, Kent, Taylor and White again studied activist organizations’ use of the Internet, this time examining how adept the organizations were at meeting informational needs and identifying what Web site design characteristics facilitate mutually beneficial interactions.<sup>106</sup> They noted that the design of a Web site should be given equal attention for its effectiveness in building relationships. “There appears to be a discrepancy between what practitioners believe their Web sites can accomplish in terms of relationship building and how Web site *design* actually facilitates relationship

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<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 267.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid.

<sup>106</sup>Michael L. Kent, Maureen Taylor, and William J. White, “The Relationship between Web Site Design and Organizational Responsiveness to Stakeholders,” *Public Relations Review* 29, no. 1 (March 2003): 63-77.

building.”<sup>107</sup> Specifically, the researchers studied two broad categories of activist environmental organizations: membership organizations, considered to be highly resource/membership dependent, and watchdog organizations, which are not as heavily dependent on members for accomplishing their mission, but instead focus efforts on “lobbying, advertising and direct pressure to their targets.”<sup>108</sup>

It was found that membership organizations were more likely than watchdog organizations to employ dialogic principles in their Web sites and they were more responsive to e-mail requests for information. Specifically, membership organizations displayed to a greater extent the principles of dialogic loop, return visiting, media utility and volunteer utility.<sup>109</sup> Kent, Taylor and White concluded that environmental organizations which rely on relationships with their audience to accomplish their goals were much more responsive to their publics. “The data show that the more dialogically oriented an organization ‘appears,’ then the more likely that organization is to actually respond to stakeholder information seeking behaviors.”<sup>110</sup> In other words, Web site design is a critical component for organizations that want to build lasting relationships and trust with their audience.

Key stakeholders in a non-profit organization represent a wide range of publics consisting of volunteers, donors, the press, staff, political leaders and service providers. Accordingly, the public relations functions of an organization’s Web site must be multi-

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<sup>107</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., 72.

dimensional to meet the needs of all constituents. Three University of Florida researchers conducted a content analysis of Web sites from the *NPT Top 100*, the *NonProfit Times*' annual study that explores the nation's 100 largest non-profit organizations.<sup>111</sup> The results indicated that non-profit organizations regarded donors as their primary public, with more prominence given to donor-related pages than pages intended for volunteer and journalist publics. In addition, the donor-related Web pages contained the most interactive features. The authors asserted that although a majority (nearly 84 percent) of non-profit Web sites contained media relations information, most had "yet to furnish journalist-friendly Web content" because the online press rooms were not clearly labeled with universal terms.<sup>112</sup>

### *The Role of Interactivity in Engaging Internet Audiences*

One reason scholars assign such technological promise to the Internet is because of its intrinsic interactive capability. Not surprisingly, interactivity is one of the most frequently studied characteristics of the Internet. Louisa Ha and Lincoln James defined interactivity as "the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to each other's communication needs."<sup>113</sup> The researchers outlined five important dimensions for interactivity on the World Wide Web: 1) playfulness—games and other curiosity-arousal

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<sup>111</sup> Hye Min Yeon, Youjin Choi, and Spiro Kioussis, "Interactive Communication Features on Nonprofit Organizations' Webpages for the Practice of Excellence in Public Relations," *Journal of Website Promotion* 1, no. 4 (2005): 61-83.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>113</sup> Louisa Ha and Lincoln E. James, "Interactivity Reexamined: A Baseline Analysis of Early Business Websites," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 42, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 456-473. <http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/ehost/detail?vid=13&hid=4&sid=1f835fea-5f91-4107-9636-48dc1ddcdcb7%40SRCM1> (accessed September 25, 2007).

devices; 2) choice—providing the user with alternatives and the availability of unrestrained navigation on the Web; 3) connectedness—providing users a feeling of being able to link to the outside world by experiencing the site’s rich content; 4) information collection—gathering user demographics, psychographics and occasionally personality characteristics, with the audience’s willingness to provide such information; and 5) reciprocal communication—two-way communication between an organization and a user through e-mail and site feedback forms.<sup>114</sup> Ha and James conducted a content analysis of business Web sites in order to assess these five dimensions of interactivity, and their findings showed Web sites for product, retail and service business sectors differed considerably in interactivity terms. The study was conducted at the true infancy of the World Wide Web, thus Ha and James’ most significant contribution is not necessarily found in their study results, but instead in the theoretical framework they provided for a concept of interactivity on the Web.

A review of literature reveals that many scholars study Web site effectiveness by exploring the intersection of Ha and James’ five dimensions of interactivity and Kent, Taylor and White’s five principles of dialogical communication. In fact, the authors themselves often cite each other’s concepts, exemplifying how well the two theories intersect in examining the public relations functions of the Web. A qualitative study of 10 South African non-governmental organizations’ (NGOs) use of the Internet revealed that the sites could be much improved if they were to incorporate more interactive

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

options and more opportunities for dialogical communication.<sup>115</sup> The researchers noted that in order to achieve this potential, the NGOs needed to properly train staff on technical aspects of the Web as well as to understand the Web site's public relations functions, especially its capability to strengthen organization-public relationships.

Interactivity is of significant interest to numerous researchers; unfortunately though, the existing research is not united in theoretical concepts. Initial problems arise in the absence of a consistent operational definition for the term *interactivity* by scholars across disciplines (e.g., journalism, public relations, computer science, issues management, communication studies and marketing/advertising). This void of consistent operationalization of the variable appears to blur some researchers' focus, often resulting in articles with literature reviews that bounce from one definition of interactivity to the next. Accordingly, since scholars define the concept of interactivity in various ways, they also use different dimensions to encompass their view of interactivity. For example, a 2004 content analysis of 64 disaster relief home pages utilized seven dimensions of interactivity conceptualized by Heeter, and Massey and Levy's studies.<sup>116</sup> Many of these interactivity dimensions express notably similar characteristics to the five dimensions proposed by Ha and James, but the researchers did not cite Ha and James at all. Such analogous conceptualizations should not exist in silos, as this will only dilute interactivity theorizing. If communication scholars wish to build a robust theory of interactivity, then

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<sup>115</sup>Annelie M. E. Naude, Johannes D. Froneman, and Roy A. Atwood, "The Use of the Internet by Ten South African Non-Governmental Organizations—A Public Relations Perspective," *Public Relations Review* 30 (2004): 93.

<sup>116</sup>Mary Jae Paul, "Interactive Disaster Communication on the Internet: A Content Analysis of Sixty-Four Disaster Relief Home Pages," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 739-753.

they must find common ground so this important concept can be empirically studied across disciplines.

### *Building Credibility*

“Credibility is, after all, the most important thing a communicator has.”<sup>117</sup>

Severin and Tankard quite succinctly impart the importance of credibility in mass communication. In general, traditional media possess checks and balances that ensure information credibility—editors check story accuracy, reporters verify source statements and journalists attempt to tell both sides of the story. Conversely, the Internet is a public domain that lacks a gatekeeper, thus the medium faces specific challenges in regard to credibility of information.

B.J. Fogg, director of the Stanford University Persuasive Technology Lab, writes that, in its simplest terms, “credibility can be defined as believability.”<sup>118</sup> Fogg et al. conducted an online study with 1,400 participants to assess how Web site elements affect perceptions of credibility. “In order of impact, the five types of elements that increased credibility perceptions were ‘real-world feel’, ‘ease of use’, ‘expertise’, ‘trustworthiness’, and ‘tailoring’. The two types of elements that hurt credibility were ‘commercial implications’; and ‘amateurism’.”<sup>119</sup> The magnitude and research methods of this study

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<sup>117</sup>Werner J. Severin and James W. Tankard, *Communication Theories: Origins, Methods, and Uses in the Mass Media* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2001), 139.

<sup>118</sup>B.J. Fogg, Jonathan Marshall, Othman Laraki, Alex Osipovich, Chris Varma, Nicholas Fang, Jyoti Paul, Akshay Rangnekar, John Shon, Preeti Swani, and Marissa Treinen, “What Makes Web Sites Credible? A Report on a Large Quantitative Study,” (paper presented at the conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Seattle, 2001), <http://captology.stanford.edu/pdf/p61-fogg.pdf> (accessed September 21, 2007).

<sup>119</sup>Ibid.

position it as one of the most frequently cited contributions in understanding credibility as it relates to the World Wide Web.

As mentioned previously, the vast majority of Internet users consider it an important source of information and entertainment, consistently outranking television.<sup>120</sup> How does this translate to audience perceptions of credibility? Andrew Flanagin and Miriam Metzger conducted a national survey to assess people's perceptions of information credibility across the spectrum of contemporary media.<sup>121</sup> Respondents indicated they believe information received from the Internet is as credible as that obtained from television, radio and magazines. Audiences perceive newspapers as higher in credibility than all other media channels. Additionally, individuals rarely verify Web-based information, a finding that suggests audiences are not critically evaluating the medium's information credibility.<sup>122</sup>

A multitude of other studies also assert that publics do not perceive the Internet and Web sites to be less credible than other media. Journalists seeking credible information are significantly more likely to use online information from non-profit and public interest groups than they are to use online information from business Web sites.<sup>123</sup> No doubt it would benefit non-profit organizations and businesses alike to critically evaluate their Web sites to ascertain how credible they will be perceived by publics.

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<sup>120</sup>University of Southern California, Center for the Digital Future, "Highlights: 2007," 2.

<sup>121</sup>Andrew J. Flanagin and Miriam J. Metzger, "Perceptions of Internet Information Credibility," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 515-540.

<sup>122</sup>*Ibid.*, 529.

<sup>123</sup>Maya Dollarhide, "Survey: Journalists Find Nonprofit Web Sites More Credible," *Media Studies Center* (March 2, 1999), <http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=11494> (accessed September 8, 2007).

Inasmuch as the World Wide Web is the only mass medium that truly exists without a gatekeeper, organizations would be foolish to not leverage their Web presence to present themselves as highly credible and interactive as possible.

*Is the Internet Living Up to Its Potential?*

Without question, the Internet is heralded by scholars, technology gurus and the public alike as a medium that has the *capacity* to significantly impact the way the world communicates. But some scholars question just how effective the Internet is and whether the medium is living up to its potential.

Linda Jean Kenix, who performed what she deemed fundamental baseline research in order to help scholars build theories of Internet efficacy, conducted a content analysis of 70 non-profit organizations' Web sites. She aimed to explore the "practical application of a widely held, utopian belief that the Internet remains a strong democratizing tool because of its inherent interactive capabilities."<sup>124</sup> Kenix developed her own conceptual categories to describe the utopian, democratic and egalitarian ideals of the Internet: 1) deliberative public sphere—functionality that deliberately engages the public in conversation; 2) opportunity for activism—engaging activist individuals by publicizing volunteer opportunities and facilitating activist activities; 3) space for marginalized voices—first-person information from marginalized people, guidance on how the marginalized could access help, or Web site adaptation for special populations; 4) interconnected, instantaneous information—search functions, site indexes,

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<sup>124</sup>Linda Jean Kenix, "In Search of Utopia: An Analysis of Non-Profit Web Pages," *Information, Communication & Society* 10, no. 1 (February 2007): 69.



employment information online, answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs); 5) advertising and fundraising revenue—fundraising appeals and items for sale, such as publications or promotional material; and 6) accountability—e-mail links and contact names to demonstrate transparency.”<sup>125</sup>

The researcher determined that advertising and fundraising revenue was the sole conceptual category in which the non-profit organizations’ Web sites fared well, with 65 percent utilizing their Web sites to raise donations. Beyond that, non-profit sites did not fulfill the other concepts.

Of most interest for this thesis was the lack of compelling evidence of non-profit Web sites providing a space for marginalized voices. The utopian ideal of the Internet maintains that it can be a place where social equity and empowerment occurs for those demographically deprived people who do not have their voices heard elsewhere in society.<sup>126</sup> Many non-profit organizations fulfill a mission to aid the marginalized individuals in our society, such as non-English speaking, homeless or blind persons. But these non-profit Web sites did not make efforts to actually engage the demographic group they purportedly care about most. There was little evidence of first-person information from marginalized people, guidance on how the marginalized could access help or Web site adaptation to special needs audiences or languages other than English. Kenix asserts that there is a long road ahead: “These findings suggest that non-profit organizations have a long way to go in developing the Internet as a deliberative, interconnected, accountable

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<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid., 81.

tool for non-profit organizations and an instantaneous, discursive, activist, space for the users of these Web sites.”<sup>127</sup>

### *Limitations of Previous Research*

Communication scholars have published a significant amount of research on the effectiveness of online communications, but the vast majority focused on the for-profit sector. Although useful to gain a basic understanding of the Internet and how it functions as a medium, studies of corporate Web sites and business communications cannot necessarily be generalized to the non-profit sector.

To fill this gap, a few communication researchers have begun to study the Internet as it relates to non-profit organizations. Previous studies have focused largely on the concepts of Web site interactivity and credibility. Most often, these studies have examined all content on the Web sites in the sample.

The present study differs from past analyses in that it explores one specific aspect of non-profit Web site content: good works stories. One can reason that the good works and acts of charity that a non-profit performs is the lifeblood of the organization. Improving some segment of society is a non-profit's reason to exist, thus it is critical for communication researchers to discern how organizations are communicating this message to their publics. Current research is needed to measure how non-profit organizations are using their Web sites to illustrate the ways in which they fulfill their missions to improve society.

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<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 87.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

#### *Research Questions, Hypotheses and Rationale*

Examining how non-profit organizations are using their Web sites to communicate good works is an area ripe for research. For purposes of the questions below, the term *good works* encompasses the acts of charity, relief, philanthropy, support services or assistance provided to the population or cause that the non-profit organization serves. Examples of good works stories by non-profits include a poverty relief organization's profile of a single-parent family transitioning from homelessness to buying a home, an environmental organization's efforts to prevent logging in national forests, or an animal shelter's anecdote of a litter of puppies rescued from a neglectful home.

It is important to note that this thesis is exploratory in nature. That is, the researcher identified no prior scholarship about non-profit Web sites' use of good works stories, hence the research questions were shaped both by the review of literature and the researcher's desire to conduct fundamental baseline research on the subject. The literature review led to the following questions:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: Do non-profit organizations utilize their Web sites to prominently portray stories of good works by the organization?

H<sub>1</sub>: Non-profit organizations will utilize their Web sites to prominently portray stories of good works by the organization.

The researcher believed the Web sites of non-profit organizations would prominently feature stories illustrating the acts of charity, relief, philanthropy, support services or assistance provided to the population or cause that the non-profit organization

serves. Web sites allow organizations to bypass traditional media gatekeepers,<sup>128</sup> an opportunity for the charity to set the agenda on what the public learns about the non-profit's mission and public policy issues.<sup>129</sup> Web sites are an extension of an organization's communication to its publics, thus it is reasonable to hypothesize that non-profits will utilize the Internet to tell good works stories.

An organization that hopes to facilitate relationships with its publics through the Internet must present useful information that addresses the interests, values and concerns of a variety of audiences.<sup>130</sup> A non-profit Web site that features good works stories informs an organization's audience on the non-profit's programs and activities. According to Kent and Taylor, "Making information available to publics is the first step involved in deepening relationships with them."<sup>131</sup>

RQ<sub>2</sub>: To what extent do non-profit Web sites employ multimedia to portray stories of good works by the organization?

In addition to textual content, visual content also plays a significant role in creating meaning for the audience. Visual imagery duplicates informational cues that individuals use to construct their perception of social reality. Messaris argues that visual images serve not only as photographic proof of textual content, they also elicit emotions

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<sup>128</sup>Stuart L. Esrock and Greg B. Leichty, "Social Responsibility and Corporate Web Pages: Self Presentation or Agenda-Setting?" *Public Relations Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 306.

<sup>129</sup>W. Timothy Coombs, "The Internet as Potential Equalizer: New Leverage for Confronting Social Irresponsibility," *Public Relations Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 299.

<sup>130</sup>Michael L. Kent and Maureen Taylor, "Building Dialogic Relationships Through the World Wide Web," *Public Relations Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 327-328.

<sup>131</sup>*Ibid.*, 328.

and establish an implicit link between the image and some other emotion or object.<sup>132</sup>

Visual elements such as photography contribute to a Web site's professional appearance and demonstrate that there is a real organization and honest and trustworthy individuals behind the Web site, all of which serve to build the credibility of a Web site.<sup>133</sup>

As the Internet has evolved, so have the multimedia components of Web sites. Traditional elements that have long accompanied stories in print media like newspapers and magazines—color photography, black-and-white photography and pull quotes—are now being utilized in online stories. Similarly, elements typically accompanying broadcast media like radio and television—audio clips and video clips—also have found their way into online stories.

RQ<sub>3</sub>: Are non-profit organizations' good works stories strictly human interest or do they also include event information, statistics and facts?

RQ<sub>4</sub>: What types of calls to action do non-profits use to synergize stories of good works?

Clearly non-profit organizations' Web sites do not exist solely to inform. One major goal in communicating to publics is to encourage action by individuals. Calls to action on Web sites—such as links to read more stories, donate online or volunteer with the organization—fulfill several of Ha and James's dimensions of interactivity.<sup>134</sup> A

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<sup>132</sup>Paul Messaris, *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1997).

<sup>133</sup>B.J. Fogg, "Stanford Guidelines for Web Credibility," A Research Summary from the Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab, Stanford University (May 2002). <http://www.webcredibility.org/guidelines> (accessed October 27, 2007).

<sup>134</sup>Louisa Ha and Lincoln E. James, "Interactivity Reexamined: A Baseline Analysis of Early Business Websites," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 42 (1998): 456-473. <http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/ehost/detail?vid=13&hid=4&sid=1f835fea-5f91-4107-9636-48dc1ddcdbc7%40SRCM1> (accessed September 25, 2007).

hyperlink to read more personal stories or receive other communications from the non-profit organization facilitates choice and connectedness for site visitors, providing visitors choice in their navigation of the site and the feeling of being able to link to the outside world and broaden one's experience.<sup>135</sup> A graphic button that urges site visitors to donate to the non-profit organization fulfills the information collection dimension of Web site interactivity. If a Web site offers users the opportunity to share their own personal stories through message boards, weblogs or fillable forms, not only is the site collecting information, the organization also is facilitating reciprocal communication.

### *Content Analysis*

Content analysis was employed in this study due to its characteristics as a method, lending itself well to the framework of this thesis. One variable to be measured in this thesis—namely story focus—can be challenging to study objectively because the concept is difficult to define and may involve researcher bias. Although the remaining variables were not as difficult to conceptualize, it was important to quantify rate of occurrence for all variables. Given the goal to conduct objective research on variables the researcher wished to quantify, content analysis seemed the most appropriate method for this thesis.

According to Kerlinger's definition, content analysis is a method that allows the researcher to analyze communication variables in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner.<sup>136</sup> To be *systematic*, content must be selected and treated according to one set of explicit and consistent rules, such as using proper procedure for sample selection and

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Fred N. Kerlinger, *Foundations of Behavioral Research*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 2000).

uniformity in coding. To be *objective*, a content analysis must be protected from researcher bias and should employ operational definitions of variables to ensure coders can arrive at the same decisions. To establish reliability for the study's results, there must be clear criteria to arrive at findings in an objective manner. The final characteristic of content analysis, *quantitative*, provides the researcher with a precise, accurate representation of the body of messages. In addition, quantitative data give the researcher statistical tools to interpret and summarize the results of the study,<sup>137</sup> which is always important if the researcher aims to generalize the research beyond the sample studied.

In addition, one of the most common purposes for employing content analysis is to “attempt to relate certain characteristics of the source of a given body of message content to the characteristics of the messages that are produced.”<sup>138</sup> This study attempted to establish connections between an organization's focus and how extensively it employed human interest stories on its Web site.

### *Method*

#### *Selection of Sample*

*The Chronicle of Philanthropy's* Philanthropy 400 rankings list for the year 2006 was used as the sampling frame for this study. The Philanthropy 400 uses financial data gathered from non-profit organizations, much of it compiled from non-profits' Form 990

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<sup>137</sup>Roger D. Wimmer and Joseph R. Dominick, *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thomson, 2003), 141.

<sup>138</sup>*Ibid.*, 142.

tax returns, to determine the 400 organizations that raise the most money each year.<sup>139</sup>

The list rank orders the non-profit organizations based on the amount they raised in the fiscal year that ended in 2005; to make the list, an organization had to raise at least \$37.7 million that year.

The Philanthropy 400 list can be sorted according to 17 types of non-profits, such as international aid organizations and public broadcasting entities. Many of the 17 subsectors were deemed inappropriate samples for this thesis that aimed to investigate good works stories. For example, there were 117 colleges and universities on the list, and these were eliminated from the sample based on the fact that their Web sites fulfill a multiplicity of purposes for an audience that seeks information primarily not related to the institution's good works (e.g., admission information; class schedules for current students; schedules for athletic, arts and cultural events; alumni involvement; etc.) Other examples of subsectors that were not ideal samples include hospitals, public broadcasting organizations and museums and libraries.

Ultimately, the researcher selected health charities as the subsector to comprise the sample. Health charities have an overarching mission to inform the public about health-related issues, assist patients and their loved ones in dealing with diseases, and fund and conduct research in the search for cures. This subsector presented an ideal type of organization to assess how non-profit Web sites utilize human-interest stories. Limiting the study to a single subsector eliminated extraneous variables that potentially may have skewed results in a multi-subsector study (e.g., international aid organizations

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<sup>139</sup>Noelle Barton, "How The Chronicle Compiled its Annual Philanthropy 400 Rankings," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, October 26, 2006, 3.



likely portray a markedly different type of human interest story than religious organizations or Jewish federations.)

The health charities subsector included 25 organizations. The coders identified one additional auxiliary Web site for the Multiple Sclerosis Society, thus the final total sample was 26 non-profit health organizations. From these 26 Web sites, the coders identified and coded 344 personal stories.

### *Unit of Analysis*

The home page, or main landing page, of the non-profit organization was the primary unit of analysis. Content located no more than three layers deep (i.e., no more than two clicks from the home page) was viewed and good works stories were identified.

The individual Web page that contained a personal story was the secondary unit of analysis. All personal stories located no more than three layers deep were identified and coded. It is important to note that for the secondary unit of analysis, only the content in the story content area was coded. Specifically, many Web sites are designed with templates comprised of standard content that remains the same on the top and left portions of all pages, often with visual imagery (vivid color photos) or calls to action (“Support Easter Seals”) that exist on every single page of the site. For this study, the Web site’s template content was not coded (i.e., a personal story was not considered to contain a visual element or call to action unless those items existed in the story content area.)

### *Operational Definitions of the Units of Measure*

The *prominence* of a personal story was measured by the number of clicks from the home page it was located. The term *number of clicks*—i.e., clicks of the computer mouse—is a simplified way of expressing the level of a Web site where content is located: layer 1 = home page; layer 2 = one click from home page; and layer 3 = two clicks from home page. A story located one click from the home page was considered more prominent than a story located two clicks from the home page. In addition, this study measured prominence of good works stories by searching links not more than three layers deep.

A secondary measure of *prominence* was employed to determine how prominent each personal story was on its respective Web page. Coders maintained the default Internet browser window size at all times and coded stories according to how much of the window the story filled (without scrolling down the page). Stories were coded as one of four sizes: less than  $\frac{1}{4}$  page,  $\frac{1}{4}$  page,  $\frac{1}{2}$  page or more than  $\frac{1}{2}$  page.

To determine the extent to which a Web site employed multimedia content to portray the non-profit's good works, the term *multimedia* was defined as including at least one of the following: color photography, black-and-white photography, video, audio and Flash presentations.

To examine the *focus* of each personal story, the text was classified according to at least one of the following dimensions: human interest, event oriented, or statistics and facts. A story could be coded as having more than one focus. For example, a breast cancer survivor's story might be dominated by emotional anecdote (qualifying it as human interest), but if the story included descriptions of how the breast cancer progressed

and how it physically affected the survivor, then the story also was statistics- and facts-focused.

To determine the perspective from which a personal story was told, *story voice* was categorized as either first person (I, me) or third person (she, he, Sally, John).

A good works story was defined as synergized with a *call to action* if the actual Web page that contained the story also contained a hyperlink (or graphic button) to at least one of the following: more personal stories or information, online giving, instructions to contact policymakers about the issue, volunteer opportunities, or subscription to receive other communications from the organization.

A personal story was defined as providing the opportunity for the *reader to share his/her own personal story* if the actual Web page that contained the story also contained a hyperlink to at least one or more of the following: message board, blog or a fillable form that allowed the user to submit comments or information.

### *Coding Procedures*

#### *Pilot Study and Intercoder Reliability*

In content analysis, reliability is of utmost importance. For a content analysis to be objective, its measures, procedures and operational categories must stand up to repeated measurement and provide similar results each time. Doing so assures the researcher that he/she is measuring the intended variables, thereby establishing internal validity of the study. To determine intercoder reliability, the researcher must assess the

levels of agreement among independent coders who code the same content utilizing the same coding instrument.<sup>140</sup>

To ensure the reliability of all operational units of measure, a pilot study was conducted using a subsample of four non-profit Web sites and 65 pages containing personal stories (approximately a 19 percent subsample of the data). One graduate student and one recent master's graduate in the department of journalism were recruited and trained to participate in the pilot study. Intercooder reliability for the pilot study was not deemed an acceptable standard. Specifically, the coders disagreed in the number of personal stories they identified on the Web sites, resulting in a significantly decreased total sample size of personal stories.

In order to correct the problem, the researcher discarded the data coded by the coder who identified fewer stories. The researcher then coded the subsample of four non-profit Web sites and 65 pages containing personal stories. Intercooder reliability was calculated using Holsti's formula, which determines reliability in terms of percentage of agreement.<sup>141</sup>

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{2M}{N_1 + N_2}$$

M refers to the number of items both coders agreed upon.  $N_1$  refers to the number of items coded by the first coder and  $N_2$  refers to the number of items coded by the second coder. For Code Sheet 1 that examined the primary unit of analysis (the home page of the non-profit organization), the intercooder reliability was 1.0. For Code Sheet 2 that

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<sup>140</sup>Wimmer and Dominick, *Mass Media Research*, 156.

<sup>141</sup>*Ibid.*, 157.

examined the secondary unit of analysis (the individual Web page that contained a personal story), the intercoder reliability was 0.89.

### *Coding Procedure and Instrument*

Each of the 26 Web sites was visited and coded according to Code Sheet 1 (see Appendix B), which identified how many clicks from the home page the most prominent personal story could be accessed in full. Code Sheet 1 also identified how many personal stories were located within two clicks of the home page. If personal stories were identified on a site, then the coder moved on to Code Sheet 2 (see Appendix B). All personal stories located within two clicks of the home page then were coded using Code Sheet 2.

The coders printed out and attached to their respective code sheets the main home page of each non-profit health organization and the Web pages that contained each personal story. The print outs were used solely for data recording purposes to ensure that intercoding was computed on the exact same material. Coders performed all coding by viewing the live Web sites, not the print outs, to simulate the content in the way that the medium is intended to be consumed.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### *Data Analysis Procedures*

The study analyzed 26 non-profit health organizations' Web sites and 344 good works stories found within two clicks of the home pages of these organizations. The data were collected, coded and statistically analyzed. An item analysis (frequency counts and percentages) was conducted on all questions on both code sheets. The thesis was exploratory in nature, aiming to quantify stories on non-profit Web sites and observe the frequency of accompanying story elements, thus further statistical analysis was extraneous.

#### *Research Questions and Hypothesis Analysis*

##### *Overview of the Web Sites*

Of the 26 Web sites, 20 contained good works stories located within two clicks of the organization's home page (Table 1). On those 20 Web sites, a total of 344 personal stories were identified. There was significant variance in the frequency range, with some sites having as few as one personal story and other sites having as many as 111 (Table 2). The median number of personal stories on non-profit health organizations' Web sites was 3.0. The total sample of 344 personal stories was distributed rather unevenly, with eight sites possessing more than 88 percent of the total sample. The six health organizations that did not display any good works stories represent 23.08 percent of the total sample of Web sites (Table 3).

Table 1. Frequency and Prominence of Personal Stories on Non-Profit Health Organizations' Web Sites

Health organization	Personal stories	Location of most prominent personal story
Alzheimer's Association	30	2
American Cancer Society	111	2
American Diabetes Association	0	NA
American Heart Association	2	1
American Kidney Fund	6	1
Arthritis Foundation	1	2
Cystic Fibrosis Foundation	23	1
Easter Seals	15	1
Health Research	0	NA
Help Hospitalized Veterans	1	1
Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International	7	2
Leukemia & Lymphoma Society	1	2
Make-A-Wish Foundation	61	1
March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation	2	2
Muscular Dystrophy Association	8	2
National Cancer Coalition	0	NA
National Children's Cancer Society	2	1
National Kidney Foundation	4	2
National Mental Health Association	0	NA
National Multiple Sclerosis Society (main site)	1	1
National Multiple Sclerosis Society (site 2) Join the Movement site	26	1
Planned Parenthood Federation of America	0	NA
Project Orbis International	15	1
Stowers Institute for Medical Research	0	NA
Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation	23	1
United Cerebral Palsy	5	1
Total	344	

*Note:* "Location of most prominent personal story" is defined as number of clicks from the organization's home page. "Not applicable" (NA) indicates sites that contained no personal stories.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Personal Stories in Web Site Sample

Number of stories	Frequency	Cumulative frequency
111	1	26
61	1	25
30	1	24
26	1	23
23	2	22
15	2	20
8	1	18
7	1	17
6	1	16
5	1	15
4	1	14
2	3	13
1	4	10
0	6	6
n=26		Median=3.0

Of the 20 Web sites that contained good works stories, a majority (12 organizations or 46.15 percent) placed their most prominent personal story within one click of the home page (Table 3). The remaining eight organizations (30.77 percent) located their most prominent personal story within two clicks of the home page. Of the six Web sites that were coded as not having personal stories (23.08 percent), either the site truly contained no good works stories, or the site's good works stories were located more than two clicks from the home page. As was operationally defined in this study, a location more than two clicks from a main page is not considered a "prominent location."



Table 3. Location of Most Prominent Personal Story in Web Site Sample

Number of clicks from home page	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percent
1	12	46.15	12	46.15
2	8	30.77	20	76.92
No personal stories found	6	23.08	26	100.00
Total	26	100.00		

Code Sheet 1 (see Appendix B) served as the coding instrument for the 26 non-profit health organizations' Web sites. Data computed from Code Sheet 1 is represented in Tables 1, 2 and 3. Code Sheet 2 (see Appendix B) was used to explore the 344 individual Web pages on which personal stories were identified. Statistical analysis of the data gathered from Code Sheet 2 is represented in Tables 4 – 9.

Regarding the prominence of each personal story on its respective Web page, the vast majority (76.45 percent) of stories encompassed more than half of the browser window (Table 4). The remaining stories were less prominently displayed with 11.63 percent taking approximately half a page, 9.01 percent taking approximately one quarter of a page, and 2.91 percent taking less than one quarter of a page.

Table 4. Prominence of Personal Story on Its Web Page

Size of story on page	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percent
< ¼ page	10	2.91	10	2.91
¼ page	31	9.01	41	11.92
½ page	40	11.63	81	23.55
> ½ page	263	76.45	344	100.00
Total	344	100.00		

### *Prominence of Good Works Stories on Non-Profit Web Sites*

RQ<sub>1</sub> sought to determine if non-profits utilize their Web sites to prominently display stories of the organizations' programs and acts of good works. As Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 indicate, non-profit health organizations did prominently portray stories of good works by the organization, thus this research question is supported. The majority of organizations not only displayed personal stories on their Web sites, they also placed the stories in prominent locations with easy access from the home page. In addition to prominent access to the stories, these personal stories also were given prominence on their individual Web pages, most often comprising more than half a page.

H<sub>1</sub> asserted that non-profits would utilize their Web sites to prominently portray stories of good works by the organization. The findings indicate this hypothesis is supported.

### *Multimedia Enhancement of Good Works Stories*

RQ<sub>2</sub> aimed to explore the extent to which non-profit Web sites employ multimedia to portray stories of good works by the organization. The vast majority (88.77 percent) of personal stories were accompanied by other visual elements (Table 5). The most frequent visual element was a color photograph, which was displayed alongside 145 personal stories (38.77 percent). The next most frequent element was a pull quote, which was used to enhance 143 personal stories (38.24 percent). Black-and-white photography accompanied 13 good works stories, and video clips provided multimedia enhancement for 15 stories. In addition to the aforementioned visual elements, the "Other" category accounted for a small percentage of the visual elements.

The coders' elaboration of this category indicated that graphic presentations of poetry and corporate sponsor logos were some of the items included in this category. In addition, it was not uncommon for a personal story to be accompanied by more than one visual element. Of the 344 total stories, 151 included multimedia enhancements with more than one element, such as a color photo and a video clip. Only 42 stories (11.23 percent) did not include anything other than textual content.

Table 5. Visual Elements that Accompanied the Personal Stories

Visual element	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percent
Color photography	145	38.77	145	38.77
Black-&-white photography	13	3.48	158	42.25
Video clip	15	4.01	173	46.26
Audio clip	2	0.53	175	46.79
Flash presentation	1	0.27	176	47.06
Pull quote	143	38.24	319	85.30
Other <sup>a</sup>	13	3.48	332	88.78
None	42	11.23	374	100.00
Total	374	100.00		

<sup>a</sup>The "Other" category included elements such as company logos, graphic poem presentations, etc.

### *Focus of Good Works Stories*

RQ<sub>3</sub> sought to determine if non-profit organizations' good works stories were strictly human interest or if they also included event information, statistics and facts. The findings show that good works stories not only included a human-interest focus, they often contained other types of information. The most prevalent story frame found in good works stories was human interest (Table 6). Of the 344 personal stories, 330

(78.95 percent) focused on human interest content. Statistics and facts were identified in 55 stories, or 13.16 percent of the sample. The final category, event-related material, was present in 33 personal stories, or 7.89 percent of the sample. In addition, 67 stories focused on more than one type of content (e.g., a predominantly human interest story also included statistics and facts about a disease.)

Table 6. Focus of the Personal Stories

Story focus	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percent
Human interest	330	78.95	330	78.95
Event oriented	33	7.89	363	86.84
Statistics and facts	55	13.16	418	100.00
Total	418	100.00		

Additionally related to RQ<sub>3</sub>, the researcher wished to ascertain the perspective from which these personal stories were told. The findings show the prevalence of third person voice used in these stories (Table 7). Third person was the perspective used in 247 (71.8 percent) stories. The remaining 97 stories (28.2 percent) were told in first person voice.

Table 7. Perspective Utilized to Tell the Personal Stories

Story voice	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percent
First person	97	28.20	97	28.20
Third person	247	71.80	344	100.00
Total	344	100.00		

### *Synergy of Calls to Action with Good Works Stories*

RQ<sub>4</sub> investigated how non-profit organizations synergized calls to action with their stories of good works. A majority of personal stories were accompanied by at least one call to action, a hyperlink to read more stories being the most frequent with 196 examples (Table 8). It also was common for non-profits to solicit donations for the organization either via a hyperlink (20) or a graphic button (79) that linked to a secure online giving site. Several pages offered users the opportunity to receive additional communication from the organization, such as e-newsletters and brochures. Interestingly, none of the organizations used the personal stories as a way to recruit volunteers for the organization. Although calls to action were prevalent in personal stories, it should be noted that 139 of the original 344 sample did not synergize good works stories with a call to action.

Table 8. Calls to Action Synergized with Personal Stories

Call to action	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percent
Hyperlink to read more stories	196	43.85	196	43.85
Graphic button to online giving	79	17.67	275	61.52
Hyperlink to online giving	20	4.47	295	65.99
Hyperlink to receive communications from the organization	13	2.91	308	68.89
Hyperlink to volunteer opportunities	0	0.00	308	68.89
None	139	31.10	447	100.00
Total	447	100.00		

In addition to the aforementioned calls to action, the study also assessed the extent to which readers were invited to share their own personal stories. A significant majority, 292 stories or 84.88 percent, did not solicit participation in story telling (Table 9). Of those stories that did, the most frequent element was a fillable form, which was included on 48 personal story pages. Insignificant occurrences of message boards existed and no blogs were found on the story pages.

Table 9. Opportunity for the Reader to Share His/Her Own Personal Story

Sharing element	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percent
Fillable form	48	13.95	48	13.95
Message board	2	0.58	50	14.53
Blog	0	0.00	50	14.53
Other	2	0.58	52	15.11
None	292	84.88	344	100.00
Total	344	100.00		

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion and Conclusions

This study was exploratory in nature and was designed to examine how non-profit organizations feature stories illustrating the good deeds and acts of charity carried out by the organization. The researcher utilized content analysis to ascertain how public charities frame themselves; that is, whether non-profit organizations make their causes more salient in the way they portray good works stories to stakeholders via the World Wide Web. According to Entman's widely recognized concept of framing, "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described."<sup>142</sup>

Framing most often is discussed in terms of news production, e.g., a newspaper reporter's coverage of one aspect of the Iraq War and how salient it becomes in a news story. But the concept of framing has implications for public relations functions as well. Frames highlight certain pieces of information in a communication, "thereby elevating them in salience."<sup>143</sup> This thesis sought to determine how non-profit organizations elevate the salience of their missions via good works stories on their Web sites.

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<sup>142</sup>Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (Autumn 1993): 52.

<sup>143</sup>*Ibid.*, 53.

Take cardiovascular disease as an example. Heart disease and stroke are the nation's No. 1 and No. 3 killers, respectively.<sup>144</sup> Of interest to the researcher was how the American Heart Association framed this information on its Web site. Did the association give a face to heart disease by presenting personal stories of people affected by this devastating disease? In this case, the answer is no. Millions of Americans are affected by heart disease and stroke each year, but the American Heart Association only provided two good works stories on its Web site. This example validates the researcher's conclusion that non-profit organizations are not taking full advantage of the World Wide Web to spread their message.

### *Findings*

#### *The First Research Question and Hypothesis*

The results of the content analysis did support the first research question and hypothesis, which stated that non-profit organizations would utilize their Web sites to prominently feature stories of good works. At first glance, the study's findings indicate this is the case. Upon closer inspection, though, there is evidence that this universal conclusion is not fully supported.

The majority of the 26 health Web sites (76.92 percent) contained good works stories located within two clicks of the home page. Those sites produced 344 personal stories among them. Computation of the mean indicated that the 26 sites contained an average of 13.23 good works stories. However, further statistical analysis revealed this to be misleading. The mean is not the appropriate measure of central tendency for this

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<sup>144</sup>American Heart Association, "Heart Disease and Stroke. You're the Cure," <http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3028707> (accessed October 28, 2007).



particular sample, as the distribution is markedly skewed. The number of stories on these Web sites ranged from zero to 111, representing an extreme range of frequency.

In this study, the median is the best measure of central tendency to provide an accurate picture of the results. The median number of stories on non-profit health Web sites was 3.0, with 25 percent of the sites having 0.75 or fewer stories and 25 percent of the sites having more than 17 stories. These numbers better represent the study's results, as the median is not sensitive to the values of the scores above and below it.

It is evident from this study that non-profit health organization Web sites are extremely varied in their presentation of good works stories. The American Cancer Society and the Make-A-Wish Foundation each provided a wealth of stories (111 and 61, respectively) to portray their mission in action, yet the American Diabetes Association with zero stories and the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society with one story made little effort to showcase their good works.

Perhaps the finding may be explained by the location in which non-profits choose to place good works stories on their Web sites. This study deemed content not prominent if it was located more than two clicks from the home page. Even though six health organizations were identified as not having personal stories, their sites may have contained such content but at a far less prominent level, i.e., three or four clicks from the main page. Although not coded in the study, the researcher noted several instances of health organizations with immense collections of personal stories deeply embedded on the Web site. Some of these instances account for non-profits having only one or two personal stories coded, but within a third mouse click there were dozens more.

It is interesting to note the researcher's observation that the health organizations with low numbers of good works stories were not always entirely lacking such content. Instead, these organizations have embedded too deeply in the Web site the stories best illustrating their mission. The results demonstrate that in some cases, little effort is needed for these organizations to elevate the location of their good works stories, thereby elevating the salience of their cause.

### *The Second Research Question*

Research Question 2 sought to quantify the extent to which non-profit health organizations employed multimedia to portray stories of good works by the organization. Of all components studied in this thesis, visual elements were by far the most prevalent item that accompanied stories on the Web sites. The findings show color photography and pull quotes were most frequently employed to enhance textual content. In addition, a significant portion of the sample included more than one multimedia element to accompany stories of good works.

Interestingly, many of the multimedia components included with these stories were items that traditionally accompany print media. Color and black-and-white photos and pull quotes are examples of visual elements frequently utilized to enhance layouts in print materials. This leads one to contemplate if these good works stories were originally produced for a print medium, such as a newsletter or magazine. Perhaps these non-profit organizations are running their good works stories in more than one medium. It is reasonable to think that these organizations might produce a story for the association's quarterly magazine, and then convert the story to an appropriate format for use on the Web site. This aspect of the study would be an interesting area to consider for future

research. A longitudinal comparative analysis could determine if significant overlap exists in human-interest stories found in non-profit print media and non-profit Web sites. In addition, the prevalence of visual elements traditionally found in print media also may reflect the Web editor's background or field of training. For example, a Web editor trained in journalism or public relations might utilize pull quotes and other elements typically found in print layouts, while a Web editor trained in computer science might be less likely to employ such elements. Conversely, a Web editor with a computer science background likely would possess skills that would allow him/her to enhance these good works stories with elaborate animation, Flash presentations or embedded video, skills not commonly incorporated in traditional journalism training.

### *The Third Research Question*

The third research question explored the focus of good works stories. The study's findings indicate that good works stories were not only framed in human-interest angles, often they also included another focus such as statistics and facts or special events. Non-profit organizations are not only illustrating personal stories of individuals affected by health-related issues, they also are incorporating other types of information. It seems that all good works stories are not dominated by emotional content; instead, many stories have delicately balanced emotion and fact.

A feature story from the Make-A-Wish Foundation portrayed 15-year-old Hugo, a young man suffering from leukemia whose wish to go on an African safari was granted when Make-A-Wish sent him to Namibia to fulfill his dream. The story focused solely on the human-interest aspect of granting an ill child's greatest wish. An example of dual focus was found in the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation's compelling portrait

of breast cancer victim Susan Komen and her sister, Nancy Brinker, who fulfilled her sister's dying wish by founding an organization to help women with breast cancer. The story was prevalently human-interest focused, but it also spotlighted special event-related material and facts about the disease's progression. Project Orbis International provided another dual focus example in its anecdote of nine-year-old Shadri Saddi, a Ugandan boy with cataracts whose eyesight was saved by the Orbis Flying Eye Hospital. In addition to a human-interest angle, Shadri's story also contained plenty of statistics and facts about cataracts and blindness in children.

This finding may be explained by the study's original determination of what constituted a good works story. The researcher instructed coders to code all stories that had a clear human-interest angle. Other stories or press releases were not coded for this study. News releases, special event promotions, research findings, disease fact sheets and various other types of text were excluded from coding, thus it is not surprising that the vast majority of stories coded were from a human-interest angle.

Again, the findings for research question three illustrate an opportunity for non-profit health organizations to better synthesize good works stories with other types of information. Compelling human-interest content likely would gain strength if accompanied by factual content as well. It can be assumed that an individual visits a health organization's Web site because she is interested in engaging with the organization's cause, whether by gathering information to aid in her fight against multiple sclerosis, learning more about how to care for a parent with Alzheimer's or finding out participation information for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's Team in Training event. Imagine the impact if all stories illustrating an organization's good works

also contained factual content educating readers about the cause. This synthesis of story focus would elevate salience of a non-profit's mission by appealing to readers on more than one level.

#### *The Fourth Research Question*

The final research question sought to determine how effectively non-profit health organizations synergized their good works stories with a call to action. The study showed that a majority of personal stories were accompanied by a call to action. Most often, good works stories contained links that urged the user to read more stories. A good portion of non-profits also used their good works stories to incorporate an “ask”, i.e., a solicitation for donations to the organization.

Despite the prevalence of calls to action in many good works stories, it is important to note the high frequency of stories that did not call readers to act or participate in any additional way. Almost one-third of the sample did not include a call to action. This presents a missed opportunity for these non-profit health organizations. In regard to this study, it would seem that the biggest hurdle would be devoting staff time and resources to acquiring human-interest stories that portray an organization's mission. However, the organizations that contributed to the total sample of stories have already crossed that hurdle. The stories of good works on the non-profit Web sites certainly would more effectively benefit the organizations if they were to urge readers to become involved in additional ways, whether by learning more about the mission through reading additional stories or by making a monetary investment to support the organization. Again, for the organizations that have devoted Web space to illustrating their good

works, it seems the slight modification of adding calls to action would serve the organization well.

Also related to Research Question 4 was an assessment of the extent to which readers were invited to share their own personal stories. The findings again indicate non-profit health organizations are falling short in this area. While a small percentage of stories provided readers a way to share their own anecdotes, nearly 85 percent of the sample contained no functionality that allowed readers to engage in this way. As the World Wide Web continues to evolve and social networking becomes the norm, non-profit organizations should consider engaging publics in this way. It should be noted that the researcher observed several blogs and message boards on these health organizations' Web sites, but they were not coded unless they were located on the same page as a good works story. It seems a logical extension for non-profits to synergize good works stories with a hyperlink to their message boards, allowing readers an easy way to participate in the story-telling process.

### *Limitations of the Research*

The sample used in this content analysis was a convenience sample representing only one subsector of non-profit organizations. In this baseline research, it was important to ensure validity of the coding instrument by limiting the sample to one specific type of non-profit, in this case, health organizations. This convenience sample does not allow for generalizations to be made for the entire non-profit sector. It cannot be assumed that the findings as they relate to health organizations could also be applied to social service organizations, religious groups or animal welfare associations. Ideally, if further research is developed and measurement reliability is strengthened, then a cross-sectional

comparative analysis would provide results that are more easily generalized for all non-profit organizations.

Another limitation was the coders' use of different computers when analyzing the non-profit Web sites. Two coders each utilized their personal computers to perform the study, which did not ensure a controlled environment for the size of the computer screen when assessing the prominence of each story on its page. Although each coder maintained the default browser screen size at all times, there is no guarantee that this screen size was the same for each coder's computer. If one coder identified a story as filling less than half a page, the other coder's screen size may have resulted in coding the same story as more than half a page. Ideally, the coders would have used one computer to code all the Web sites, thereby decreasing the possibility of an intervening variable creating spurious results for this particular question on the code sheet.

An additional limitation was the difficulty coders experienced when identifying the total number of good works stories on each Web site. Regarding this particular question on Code Sheet 1, coding accuracy in the pilot study was significantly below acceptable standards. The researcher's investigation revealed that one coder utilized drop-down menus to access good works content directly from the home page, resulting in higher numbers of stories located within two clicks of the home page. The other coder did not utilize drop-down menus in this way, adding an additional click to her count as she identified stories. The end result was a significantly decreased sample size. This limitation resulted from insufficient coder training in that the researcher did not specify that drop-down menus, when present, should always be used to access content. The

researcher corrected this problem in the final study by discarding one coder's data and recoding all content according to the specification that drop-down menus be utilized.

In addition, the researcher observed that, in general, coders had difficulty in counting the number of personal stories. The nature of Web sites as a medium produced difficulty in keeping track of one's path to access the stories. Since hyperlinks connect various pages of a Web site, two users might take very different paths to reach a personal story. This introduces a threat to the study's validity. Taking this obstacle into account, future research could utilize teams of coders. If two teams of two coders each were to perform the study, then assigning coder roles would ensure that one coder is responsible for keeping track of navigational paths used to identify stories, while the other coder is responsible for coding the content identified by the first coder. Working in tandem with a navigational partner would allow the content coder to focus only on story content, thereby eliminating confusion in counting stories.

### *Suggestions for Further Research*

Without question, this area is ripe for further research. Indeed, the nascent state of research on this subject compelled the researcher to focus her thesis in this area. The thesis sought to discern how non-profit organizations are communicating their stories of good works to their publics via the World Wide Web.

This research may provide a springboard for further research that could be generalized to all non-profit organizations. It would be interesting to replicate this study with the other 16 non-profit subsectors. If data are gathered on all types of non-profits possessing a diverse range of organizational missions, then sound conclusions could be drawn for the entire non-profit community. Ultimately, a cross-sectional comparative



analysis would be ideal to provide a meaningful picture of how non-profits are communicating to their publics via good works stories.

Further research might incorporate qualitative components, such as interviews with the communications directors who are responsible for non-profit Web sites. It is not enough to quantify good works stories and their accompanying elements. Understanding the thinking and strategy behind a Web site is important to provide a well-rounded picture of the public relations functions of the medium. In-depth discussion with these communications practitioners likely would reveal insight that cannot be garnered from a one-way content analysis. In addition, knowing the background and training of the communications directors and Web editors—i.e., journalism/public relations versus computer science/programming—would provide better understanding of the current state of good works stories on non-profit Web sites. Are these practitioners savvy Web programmers with little training in communication tactics, or are they public relations pros who maintain the organization's Web sites as one of many functions in their communications job?

Comparative studies of good works stories in various non-profit media would provide an interesting aspect to consider. Research should investigate the origin of these good works stories; that is, are these good works stories produced with the intention of placing them in both print media and online media. A longitudinal comparative analysis could determine if significant overlap exists in human-interest stories found in non-profit print media and non-profit Web sites. These findings in conjunction with qualitative practitioner interviews may divulge useful information about how non-profit communications departments function. Best practices could be developed for

practitioners by assessing the state of communications staffing, resources, budget and strategic planning.

This research also reveals significant opportunity for experimental analysis of the topic. For example, building on this study's quantification of the presence of variables that accompanied good works stories, it would be interesting to determine how users process these variables. An experiment tracking the eye movement of users as they process the non-profit organizations' Web sites would provide insight into how visual elements or calls to action contribute to users' processing of the information on the Web page.

Experimental analysis is an ideal mechanism to assess the effectiveness of good works stories on non-profit Web sites. As mentioned previously, the Care.org Web site represents an outstanding example of a non-profit's use of multimedia to tell highly compelling stories of the organization's fight against global poverty. In addition to well-crafted textual content explaining CARE International's mission, the Web site is filled with moving imagery in Flash presentations and video clips. Further research might incorporate an experiment to determine the effectiveness of CARE's textual content versus its multimedia content. Following exposure to either the textual content or the multimedia content, researchers could assess users' attitudes about the empowerment of women and global poverty and users' propensity to support CARE International. Being able to ascertain the effectiveness of these communication delivery vehicles would be an invaluable step in guiding other non-profit organizations as they work to improve their Web sites.

## *Conclusions*

On a superficial level, non-profit health organizations do utilize their Web sites to prominently portray stories that illustrate the organizations' good works and acts of charity. However, there is great discrepancy in the extent to which these organizations present good works stories. A select number of non-profits provide model examples in the prevalence, prominence and synergy with calls to action of good works stories on their Web sites, yet the majority of non-profits are not utilizing the medium to its fullest capacity. These findings are in line with other studies that found that organizational Web sites are not leveraging the Internet's full communication potential.

The Internet as a medium is still in its infancy, thus communications practitioners face a steep learning curve. Despite its infancy, use of the Internet has exploded, and non-profit organizations must keep pace if they wish to remain relevant. The Red Cross clocked more than 1,000 online gifts per minute in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina,<sup>145</sup> a powerful reminder that Americans increasingly are turning to the Internet in order to support the causes that are important to them. The researcher maintains that with a few simple steps, a non-profit could vastly improve how well the organization's societal benefit is communicated to target publics. A non-profit can elevate the salience of its mission by elevating the prevalence and prominence of good works stories on the Web site and accompanying the stories with visual elements, calls to action and opportunities for reader engagement.

The thesis embarked upon a new area of research in non-profit communications: how organizations are framing their causes by spotlighting the segment of society that

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<sup>145</sup>Noelle Barton, Sam Kean, and Nicole Wallace, "Still Growing Strong," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, June 14, 2007.

benefits from their charitable endeavors. The study's findings and literature review have important implications for non-profit communications practitioners. A non-profit organization's success is measured not by the size of its bank account, but instead by the amount of good it performs in society. Framing a non-profit mission by communicating stories of good works is a strategy that not only will illustrate the organization's value to key stakeholders, ideally it also will make the cause more salient in society.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### List of Web Site Addresses for the Study's Sample

### List of Web Site Addresses for the Study's Sample

Health organization	Web site URL
Alzheimer's Association	<a href="http://www.alz.org">www.alz.org</a>
American Cancer Society	<a href="http://www.cancer.org">www.cancer.org</a>
American Diabetes Association	<a href="http://www.diabetes.org">www.diabetes.org</a>
American Heart Association	<a href="http://www.americanheart.org">www.americanheart.org</a>
American Kidney Fund	<a href="http://www.kidneyfund.org">www.kidneyfund.org</a>
Arthritis Foundation	<a href="http://www.arthritis.org">www.arthritis.org</a>
Cystic Fibrosis Foundation	<a href="http://www.cff.org">www.cff.org</a>
Easter Seals	<a href="http://www.easterseals.org">www.easterseals.org</a>
Health Research	<a href="http://www.healthresearch.org">www.healthresearch.org</a>
Help Hospitalized Veterans	<a href="http://www.hhv.org">www.hhv.org</a>
Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International	<a href="http://www.jdrf.org">www.jdrf.org</a>
Leukemia & Lymphoma Society	<a href="http://www.lls.org">www.lls.org</a>
Make-A-Wish Foundation	<a href="http://www.wish.org">www.wish.org</a>
March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation	<a href="http://www.marchofdimes.com">www.marchofdimes.com</a>
Muscular Dystrophy Association	<a href="http://www.mdausa.org">www.mdausa.org</a>
National Cancer Coalition	<a href="http://www.nationalcancercoalition.org">www.nationalcancercoalition.org</a>
National Children's Cancer Society	<a href="http://www.children-cancer.org">www.children-cancer.org</a>
National Kidney Foundation	<a href="http://www.kidney.org">www.kidney.org</a>
National Mental Health Association	<a href="http://www.nmha.org">www.nmha.org</a>
National Multiple Sclerosis Society (main site)	<a href="http://www.nationalmssociety.org">www.nationalmssociety.org</a>
National Multiple Sclerosis Society (site 2) Join the Movement site	<a href="http://www.jointhemovement.org">www.jointhemovement.org</a>
Planned Parenthood Federation of America	<a href="http://www.plannedparenthood.org">www.plannedparenthood.org</a>
Project Orbis International	<a href="http://www.orbis.org">www.orbis.org</a>
Stowers Institute for Medical Research	<a href="http://www.stowers-institute.org">www.stowers-institute.org</a>
Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation	<a href="http://www.komen.org">www.komen.org</a>
United Cerebral Palsy	<a href="http://www.ucp.org">www.ucp.org</a>

## APPENDIX B

### Coding Sheets



## Coding Sheets

Organization (full name) \_\_\_\_\_

URL \_\_\_\_\_

How many clicks away from the home page  
is the most prominent personal story that can  
be accessed **in full** (i.e., not just teaser text  
that has to be clicked on)?

☐ 0

☐ 1

☐ 2

Number of personal stories located within  
two clicks of home page:

\_\_\_\_\_

Coder: \_\_\_\_\_

Organization \_\_\_\_\_

Story \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_

Prominence of story on the page

- ☐ Less than 1/4 page
- ☐ 1/4 page
- ☐ 1/2 page
- ☐ More than 1/2 page

Visual elements that accompany the story text:

- ☐ Color photo
- ☐ B/W photo
- ☐ Video clip
- ☐ Audio clip
- ☐ Flash presentation
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

What is the focus of the story? (may check more than one)

- ☐ Event oriented
- ☐ Human interest
- ☐ Statistics and facts

In what voice is the story written?

- ☐ First person (I, me)
- ☐ Third person (she, he, Sally, John)

Call to action located on the same page as the personal story?

- ☐ Link to read more stories
- ☐ Link to online giving
- ☐ Graphic button to online giving
- ☐ Link to contact policymakers about the issue
- ☐ Link to volunteer opportunities
- ☐ Link to receive communications from organization

Opportunity for reader to share her own personal story:

- ☐ Message Board
- ☐ Blog
- ☐ Fillable form
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Coder: \_\_\_\_\_

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