COMMUNICATING ONLINE | A PRACTICAL GUIDE

WEB STYLE

FACEBOOK VIRAL CAMPAIGNS SOCIAL SOCIAL MEDIA BOOKMARKING TWITTER VISITORS ONLINE ANALYTICS BLOGS WEBSITES ADVOCACY MANAGING YOUR IMAGE

OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

WELCOME TO THE OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS WEB STYLE GUIDE.

Here you will find the latest standards, best practices, strategies, and recommendations that guide our online work and may be relevant and useful to you as well. Remember, the success of any online endeavor requires a well-thought-out plan complete with a specific objective and audiences you are trying to reach. Nothing here is set in stone; our guidelines are constantly evolving, and we welcome your input on them.

OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

online advocacy

ONLINE ADVOCACY IS COMPLICATED, and what may work well for one campaign or organization may not work for another. A central part of any advocacy strategy, however, is knowing what your goals are. This usually consists of answers to the following questions:

WHOM DO YOU WISH TO COMMUNICATE WITH?
WHAT DO YOU WANT TO TELL THEM?
WHAT DO YOU WANT THEM TO DO WITH THAT INFORMATION?

MAKE SURE THAT YOUR STRATEGY is something that you can actually implement with the resources that you have. It's important to remember, however, that your strategy is a sketch of how you want to get to your goal: Changing circumstances and unexpected developments can and should have a strong impact on what you choose to do. Don't let your strategy lull you into inflexibility.

Keep track of all of the things that you've done for your campaigns, evaluate what has and hasn't worked, and develop your own online-advocacy best practices from those evaluations. This can be a very hard thing to do; often, there isn't time to take stock of where you are and what you've done because you must focus on the present and future. Investing time in evaluating your past, however, can provide you with some of your most valuable insights.

CHOOSING YOUR TOOLS

There is a wide array of advocacy tools out there, but choosing them should be one of your last decisions when planning a campaign, not one of your first. Your objectives and target audience will determine the tools you need.

Essential tools include:

- **A CENTRAL ONLINE HUB:** this is the place where people are going to find authoritative information about your campaign. Will it be a regular website? A Facebook page? Either way, it should be a single place where people can be sure to find the definitive and latest information.
- **A WAY TO REACH YOUR SUPPORTERS** and build a relationship with them. You can use RSS, email, Facebook, or Twitter, but you don't want to bite off more than you can chew—make sure whatever outreach tools you decide to use are ones that you can reasonably maintain on a regular basis. A Facebook group or Twitter account that has only been used a handful of times (and hasn't been updated in months) will undermine your reputation.

Here is a list of the general categories of tools, what they do, and how you might use them.

SUCCESSFUL ONLINE ADVOCACY

One of the most well-known and successful online advocacy campaigns is **charitywater.org**. Through engaging videos, Twitter, and other media, the organization has helped hundreds of thousands of people around the world get access to clean and safe drinking water.

invisiblepeople.tv uses video storytelling and crowdsourcing (using the public to gather information) to help challenge stereotypes about homeless people.

malarianomore.org uses Twitter, video, and other tools in its efforts to eradicate malaria by 2015.

Petitions

Online petitions are not all the same. Some are only able to collect the essential information, store it, and present it later—giving you the most basic information about the people who signed your petition. Others offer a whole host of add-ons that allow a signatory to perform a set of actions after having signed the petition, such as sending a fax or email to an elected official via the website, circulating the petition to a list of friends, and helping you set up and manage an email newsletter list. The services that focus on petitions only are more likely to be low-cost or free.

Whatever tool you decide to use, remember that online petitions most often have a very low impact. Even if you go to the trouble of printing it out and delivering it by hand to the relevant person or organization, it can be much more easily dismissed than a traditional petition (i.e., one with signatures, names, and addresses entered by hand).

Mass Email

A wide variety of tools are available for sending email, all with varying capabilities and levels of sophistication. If your email list is small (i.e., under 50 people), it may make sense to start by using your own email account. Perhaps the most important thing to remember to do if you choose this direction is to send the email to yourself and put your email list into the BCC (blind carbon copy) field. This assures that people who reply to your email won't be able to reply to everyone on your list.

Once you start sending your emails, you may get curious about which people are clicking on, whether your email is going into people's spam folders, or if recipients are even opening your email. Email marketers provide these services. Our section on email and newsletters offers a description of what you should expect from an email provider.

Social Media

This includes Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, and even some emerging applications for cell phones, such as FourSquare.

Twitter and Facebook are centered on building a social network of friends or like-minded people. Each service is based on postings and the conversations that spin off of them. In the case of Twitter, you have 140 characters to express whatever it is that you're trying to get across. Facebook is slightly more lenient, but the connections you have with people are somewhat firmer—people have chosen your group or to be in touch with you specifically and the attachment is mutual in order for it to work; Twitter doesn't require a mutual relationship for there to be communication.

We're all familiar with YouTube and it has proven to be particularly effective at exposing people or groups that aren't accustomed to being watched and recorded. A good example is the video of the New York police officer assaulting a bicyclist during a protest ride (YouTube: Critical Mass Bicyclist

Assaulted by NYPD). Without the video and without the distribution on YouTube, this story would not have had nearly as large an impact. (It was viewed more than two million times.)

With all of these tools, it's important to keep in mind that they are just tools and not solutions in and of themselves.

CRM Databases

Customer relationship management (CRM) databases can be incredibly helpful but also complicated. Databases can be powerful tools for creating profiles of who is interested in your campaign, how active each person is, how much they donate, and other valuable information. This can enable you to really begin managing relationships with partners and allies and microtargeting—which really allows you to get every ounce of value and input from your membership.

CRM databases are now a fundamental part of most state-wide and national election campaigns. They give campaign managers the ability to understand exactly where their support is, where it isn't, and where it could be right down to specific addresses. Databases can enable you to send emails or make telephone calls only to that neighborhood effected by such-and-such a policy, and help you run microcampaigns that target only the relevant decision makers by contacting only their constituents.

The key thing to remember is that tools like this aren't cheap and they require skilled people to manage them. Like all analytical tools, the strength of a CRM database lies in both the tool itself and the people using it and interpreting what comes out of it.

Website Tools

There are a variety of tools that you can use to build websites that have little or no cost such as Blogspot, WordPress, Joomla, Drupal, and DotNetNuke. However, these tools often require a certain level of expertise to install, design, and operate. You may also have to pay for hosting and a domain, depending on what you choose to do. These tools can be an essential cornerstone to building an advocacy campaign, as a professional looking website that is routinely updated presents the world with a strong and engaging identity for your organization.

EMAIL AND NEWSLETTERS

The quality of email and newsletters is crucial. Offering compelling, concise messages greatly increases the likelihood that they will be read, responded to, and forwarded to others.

Set Specific Goals & Actions

What's your objective in sending this email? Do you want people to post a comment to a story? Do you want someone to sign a petition? Donate money? Set priorities for those objectives and focus on achieving them in order of priority. Your objectives should be narrow and quantifiable, such as the advocacy campaign examples provided on page 2.

"To keep people informed" is too broad to be an action; what do you want them to do with this information? What is the next step for them to take? This could even be as simple as getting them to forward the message to friends, or to interact with you and others via your social media sites.

Establish a Schedule

Determine whether you want to reach out to your audience via email on a regular basis (i.e., monthly, quarterly, biannually, etc.) and commit to it. Create an editorial calendar a few months in advance. Don't promise something you cannot deliver.

Respect Your Audience

Make sure you're not bombarding your audience with emails. There's no bigger mistake than to treat your email lists casually and use them carelessly. Make every email you send count—ask "Does this email add value? Or is it a perfunctory announcement?" If it's the latter, it will make recipients less likely to open the next email that you send them.

Never "spam" people. Place an email signup box prominently on your website, and use that to build your mailing list. Clearly let subscribers know that when they sign up, you will not sell or otherwise share their information under any circumstances.

Don't send emails to people who have not signed up for them—that's a quick way to alienate your audience. Include in your email template a simple way for recipients to unsubscribe.

You can also give people choices as to what content they would like to receive; perhaps they only want to hear about a specific issue or region, just the monthly updates, or just urgent appeals. Whatever it is, think about your readers and what they want, not just what you want out of them.

Be Succinct and Punchy

You probably get over 100 emails a day, perhaps many more. Think about the qualities you appreciate most in an email: short, sweet, and to the point. The design, the colors, the tone . . . all of these elements are secondary to simply getting the point across quickly. When you send an email, respect recipients' time (and crowded email boxes) and keep it simple and direct.

Successful email newsletters consist of a few brief items, each with a title and short (1-2 sentence) description, giving the reader the option to click to the full story on your website. Online, people tend not to read large blocks of text; rather, they scan, looking for keywords of interest to them.

Enable readers to tell at a glance what kinds of information you are offering. Item titles and short descriptions should be lively but informative; avoid coy headlines or buzzwords that obscure the actual content. You want to entice readers to click on the links by using relevant, accurate keywords.

If you have more than a few items, provide a table of contents at the top. Again, this enables readers to easily determine the content of your newsletter.

Personalize

Emails that come from an actual person (particularly someone your recipients might even be able to respond to) are often more effective than those that don't; recipients tend to feel a greater sense of connection to a person with an actual name, rather than something like "no-reply@mailsender.com."

Choose the Right Subject Line

Your email subject line is key—if readers don't have a compelling reason to open the email, it's much more likely to be deleted. Be descriptive yet brief: instead of a generic title like "Human Rights News, July 2009," try a more accurate, specific one such as "Iraq Refugees in Crisis: How You Can Help." If you have multiple topics, highlight a couple of the most important ones. Shorter titles (no more that 35 characters) are the most effective.

Sending Email

Unless your mailing list contains fewer than 50 addresses, we recommend using an email newsletter service provider (such as MailChimp) to send your emails. Many of these services offer free usage for small lists, nonprofit discounts, or pay-as-you-go plans for infrequent mailings. In addition to providing handy design templates, they also manage subscribes and unsubscribes effectively and track the results of each mailing. (Key data to watch includes "open rates," "click-through rates," and "response rates.") Analyzing this data and incorporating subscriber feedback into your online strategy will help you meet your specific predetermined goals (but keep in mind that it takes time for patterns to emerge).

If you decide to send mass emails yourself (instead of using a newsletter service), make sure you inform your Internet Service Provider (and/or IT department) that you'll be doing so. There are risks in sending huge amounts of email—a primary one being that you may get blacklisted as a spammer by email providers like Google, Hotmail, and Yahoo!. Also, it can take hours to send to a large list (there's only so much email that you can send in a minute), so prepare in advance.

Before sending to any list, always send out a test email (or a few iterations) to a small group of colleagues to proofread for errors. It's also wise to view the test email in a variety of email clients and browsers to ensure the formatting is correct in multiple scenarios.

HTML vs. Text

It's certainly possible to send emails in plain text, and subscribers using certain mobile devices will need to view them that way. However, if you want to send an email with a truly eye-catching look and feel, you'll need to code it in HTML. Although Microsoft Outlook offers limited HTML email capabilities, sending properly formatted HTML emails requires an HTML email server.

Again, email newsletter service providers can do all the hard work for you here. If you don't know HTML, they offer tools to generate HTML code from emails you design using their simpler tools. They can also detect whether or not the recipients on your list are able to view HTML emails and can ensure that each person receives the right version.

Don't Be Afraid to Experiment

You and your colleagues can't agree on what the right call to action is? Don't like the wording of the lead-in and think something else might work better? If your list is large enough, segment it into two or three groups and run a test to see which version works better. Try pulling out two smaller groups from your full list, sending each list a different version of your email, look at the results and then send out the winner to the remainder of the list. Service providers often offer easy ways to do this type of "a/b testing." Small experiments like these can lead to a lot of learning down the road.

VIRAL CAMPAIGNS

The most important thing to remember when trying to make something go viral is that, in 99 percent of cases, it never happens. While this can frequently be attributed to people making some obvious mistake or another, most often it's because making something go viral is tremendously difficult and far outside of your control. Trying to go viral is fine as an aspiration, but it should not be viewed as a singular or central goal unless you're able to put serious resources behind it.

That said, the following tips should help make it more likely that your video/audio/text goes viral:

Promote Your Content

The first thing that you need to do is to send your content to people and make sure that it hits the widest audience possible at once. "Soft launching" viral media works if your content is amazing and timeless, but in all other cases you need to seed your content as broadly as possible (thus, giving it the greatest potential to take root).

Keep the Content Short

No matter what your content is, most people won't care after two minutes and thirty seconds. So, if you can't get the gist across in that amount of time, perhaps what you have isn't appropriate for a viral campaign. There are exceptions to this and your content may be one of them, but you really have to focus on the audience and understand that most people don't want to (or can't) have a seven-minute documentary interrupt their day.

GOING VIRAL

Media goes "viral" when it is passed from person to person via the Internet until it reaches a critical mass of online viewers seeing it. Some good examples of viral successes include:

- a short music video produced by a disgruntled airline passenger chastising the airline for breaking his guitar; (**YouTube: United Breaks Guitars**)
- a YouTube-based television show that made headlines for its portrayal of a girl in a strict family—succeeding largely because no one could tell at first whether it was reality or fiction. (**YouTube: lonelygirl15**)

Use Humor or Surprise to Get Content Forwarded

Presenting information about your organization or issue in a humorous or shocking way can help prompt people to forward your content. If it is done in a way that doesn't trivialize the issue you are working on or diminish the people you are trying to help, a viral campaign that generates a good laugh can complement and reinforce other efforts that may use scandalous or shocking information to get people interested and involved with your issue.

Have an "Ask"

What do you want people to do once they see your campaign? Don't be caught on your heels; when your content goes viral, make sure that people know who did it and what they can do about it. For example, make it easy for them to sign up for something or to make a positive impact—you don't want to miss any opportunities to use your viral campaign to mobilize people around your issue or organization.

ONLINE OUTREACH

Sooner or later, if you're trying to promote an idea or cause, you're going to deal with bloggers. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that bloggers are, for the purposes of most civil society organizations, exactly the same as journalists with one notable exception: many bloggers do not have editorial or organizational constraints. This can make them, in many ways, a more powerful advocate for your cause—or in some cases, your worst nightmare.

Use RSS

RSS stands for (depending on who you ask) either Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication. Both terms are correct and each does half of the job of explaining what RSS is. RSS is a way for a website to syndicate its content, in whole or in part, to the rest of the world (on the Internet) without formatting (i.e., no design is included in RSS, only the raw content from the website). If you make your content easily accessible via RSS, there's a much better chance that it will get written about. Many bloggers aggregate feeds from many sites to stay on top of breaking stories and trends, as well as receive material to write about. The Open Society Foundations' website is one source for an example of how to present RSS news feeds.

Understand the Space & Reach Out

Google Alerts and Technorati.com are good tools to find blogs that cover your particular subject area. They are also good tools to maintain a sense of how the public feels about whatever issue you're working on. Reaching out to the blog's authors when they're covering your area can be a good way to build a relationship. But you should always tread lightly and be as informed as possible about whom you're talking to—your conversations may very well find their way onto the pages of the blog.

Getting Stories Written

Always be candid and clear: let whomever you contact know exactly who you are and what organization you represent. If you think it would be harmful for you to divulge that information, it is probably best to not work with that blog or blogger. Always represent yourself truthfully and never "pay for play" (i.e., provide or suggest financial compensation to the blogger for coverage of your issue or organization)—scandal is big business and being involved in one can ruin your credibility and reputation in an instant.

Sometimes you don't need to reach out directly to bloggers. Posting a story on your own blog that links to another blog is often a good way to get a blogger's attention. They can see via "trackbacks" or another blogger's own stats tracking that you've written about them, and they will sometimes respond to what you've written on your blog, respond on their own blog, or contact you directly. This can help build a relationship of copromotion, cultivating a community around your work and your cause.

REPUTATION AND ISSUE MONITORING

Online "reputation monitoring" simply means finding and tracking what gets said about your organization, program, campaign, or issue. It can help you measure the effectiveness of your work or locate negative or false information about you (so that you may promptly correct or address it if necessary). The following are a few suggestions of what you can do:

Google Alerts

Google provides a service to automatically search for news related to whatever subjects you wish and email you the results on a monthly/weekly/daily basis. You can also subscribe to alerts via RSS. If you use only one form of online monitoring, Google should be it.

Google is often a suitable substitute for higher-cost news clipping services. There is an important exception, though; particularly in the areas of policy, many of the journals either aren't published online or if they are, they often require a subscription to see the content, meaning that Google will not find or send you this content. It's a big blind spot in some cases. Note also that Google is less effective for the international press.

Technorati.com

Technorati is a website that takes every post from every blog that it can find and gives it a score based on factors such as what other blogs are talking about, what blogs are linking to your blog or your organization's blog, and what blogs you are linking to. They call this score "authority," and on some level, you can use it to judge what your reputation is within the blogosphere and beyond; the closer your reputation score gets to 1000, the more authority you have (based on their algorithm, of course). Nothing is perfect, but this is a good way of getting a sense of where you stand in the blogosphere.

Site Surveys and Polling

It may make sense for you to run a survey on your website. Of course, it depends on your issue area (it would be ill-advised to put a lot of stock in a site survey if you're dealing with an issue that is particularly contentious, as your results will be maliciously skewed one way or another), but hearing directly from people using your site or interacting with the issue that you care about can give you a sense of what some people think.

It may also make sense, if you have the budget, to do focus groups or polling. This may be out of reach for many, but there are alternatives available, such as researching recent polls to see if the subject you're looking into has already been covered by another poll (University of Michigan has a very good list of poll databases).

Track Comments

This involves finding websites and blogs that are discussing you or your focus area to get a sense of what, exactly, they are saying. There are ways to do this that are more or less scientific (coding versus just getting a general sense of the mood), but simply going out and examining what is being said once or twice a week (or even once a month on less active issues) can pay dividends.

Real-Time Search

Because of the volume of content that is created on the fly, it is now possible to do searching that aggregates results as they are created—allowing you to see the discussion all over the web as it is happening. (Much of this, however, depends on the quality and the scope of the search tool you use.) There are several real-time search services and some are clearly much better than others. Some focus on searching Twitter nearly to the exclusion of everything else and others are better at integrating other parts of the "real-time web"—here are a few:

- oneriot.com
- socialmention.com
- collecta.com

Wikipedia

It may also be helpful to "watch" pages on Wikipedia, particularly if you're working on an issue that is changing and high-profile (you can only watch issues if you're a registered member of Wikipedia). This will help you keep track of who is making changes and give you the opportunity to correct the record if necessary.

IDENTITY

FOR ANY ORGANIZATION, A NAME and a clear, consistent articulation of who they are and what they stand for can be some of their strongest assets. Even if an organization comprises an incredibly diverse range of programs, virtually all of them can leverage the power of a shared and consistent identity to increase trust and build relationships.

CONVERSELY, EVERYTHING that an organization's various departments and projects say and do can help cultivate and reinforce the organization's identity. Clarity and consistency of expression demonstrate to the rest of the world that a group is strong, organized, and driven by meaningful and transparent values.

ONE OF THE CRITICAL WAYS THE OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS and other civil society organizations convey their identity is visually, via a name and logo. With time and repetition, people begin to remember this visual identity and associate it with an organization's values and mission. Inconsistent use of logos undermines these linkages. Consistency allows people at a glance to recognize and trust your content, and allows programs that you operate and grantees that you support to leverage the power of your identity.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO

The Open Society Foundations believe that documentary photography, both still and motion, plays a role in shaping public perception and effecting social change. Across all of our visual work, including print and multimedia publications, we collaborate with documentary photographers and radio and video storytellers to feature photography and video addressing social justice and human rights issues that coincide with the Open Society Foundations' mission.

Our approach to photography and video is guided by a few fundamental beliefs and conventions that may also be useful to you when considering using these mediums for your work.

Photography should enhance the presentation and content of publications across all print and digital mediums. A documentary photograph or video is editorial content—meaning it makes a statement and is not merely ornamental. We select photographs and produce documentary video to strengthen the core message and avoid eliciting pathos or oversentimentalization of the issues.

Stock/advertising photography, audio, or video that may or may not feature models are not used in Open Society Foundations productions. The use of advertising or stock assets, particularly in combination with documentary photography/audio/video captured under journalistic ethical standards, can raise questions about whether footage is captured in reality or intentionally

VISUAL IDENTITY

When creating a visual identity for your organization, consider the following:

- **Try to think of an image or terms** that are simple and can be understood and reproduced clearly and powerfully in a variety of formats (web, print,) and sizes (banners to business cards).
- **If you have the time and resources**, you may want to consult with a professional graphic designer to help develop a visual identity for your group.
- **Once you have a visual identity** for your organization or you have one that is well established and you are comfortable with, you should make sure that the identity is used by staff, partners, grantees, and others in a consistent manner and in contexts that will not cause potential confusion about the extent of your support or involvement with a given issue or organization.

orchestrated for illustration, as is often the case with advertising and stock.

Photography Usage Conventions

- **STILL IMAGES** should be run full frame whenever possible and treated as important adjuncts to editorial content. To retain the integrity of the photographers' vision, images are published with the photographer's toning with no digital alterations, mirroring, aspect distortions or cropping that alters the message of the photograph.
- **IN MOST CASES, PHOTOGRAPHS** are not framed by rules or boxes.
- **TREATMENT** is appropriate to the image.
- **FACES AND OTHER KEY AREAS** of images should not be obscured by type or other design elements.
- **PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHERS**, videographers, other consultants, and members of your staff who produce multimedia works for your organization should be familiar with and follow whatever legal requirements and professional conventions prevail in the location where they are working. The Open Society Foundations require the use of consent forms and recommends them, particularly when working on issues and subjects that are considered sensitive and the privacy and security of anyone featured in the work could be jeopardized by display and distribution of the material.

Portraiture

- **WHEN PHOTOGRAPHING EXPERTS**, partners, and grantees for our publications and website, we strive for clean, well-lit, artistic "environmental" portraits where the subject's expression and surroundings inspire a mood and a story. When possible, portraits should represent the diversity and expertise of the individuals with whom you work and should convey both seriousness and hope. Unless specifically noted otherwise, faces should be visible and horizontal images are preferred.

Video Interviews

- **VIDEO INTERVIEWS** that we conduct in-house utilize a standard background with professional lighting and audio recording. In the field, interviews should be conducted in a place where there is as little ambient noise as possible.
- **A TWO-CAMERA** HD setup is optimal, with at least one camera operator and one dedicated interviewer in the room. All interviews are conducted in a conversational format between the subject and interviewer. The interviewer should be mindful that, during editing, the voice of the interviewer is removed.

Flipcams

- **GENERALLY, TRIPOD USE** is encouraged whenever possible to improve visual clarity.
- Find a quiet, brightly lit room. Do not record in rooms where radio, television, or other distracting audio/visual sources are playing.

- **RECORD DATE, LOCATION**, subject names, event title and description, and other relevant data for archival purposes.

MANAGING YOUR IMAGE ONLINE

It's important to be aware of what else is on the Internet about you, as that may have an impact on how you and your work are perceived. Do some research and prepare yourself for the possibility that others may check up on you.

Establish & Maintain Credibility

We work in a field where being factual and accurate matters. Because of the immediacy of the web and the ability to correct mistakes easily, there is often a temptation to publish whatever you have in hand and check for mistakes later. Don't do it. You will, more than likely, develop a less-than-desirable reputation and either lose what audience you have or never develop one in the first place.

Avoid deleting content whenever possible. Once something's been published on the web, it's out there—in Google caches, links, reprints or excerpts on other websites—permanently and beyond one's control. Removing content from a website then tends to only look suspicious, as it gives the impression you're trying to hide something.

Consistent Look and Feel

Your website or blog will be judged on appearances as well as on content. A pleasing and consistent design can lend your words a level of credibility beyond what is actually there. That doesn't mean the design has to be expensive or complicated, but the design does matter. A simple, easy-to-maintain theme that doesn't require any real technical skill to maintain is a wise choice; it will go the distance with staff who may not be well-versed in coding or design and present an aesthetically pleasing way for visitors to interact with your content.

Here is a short list of things to keep your eye on:

- **USE OF FONTS:** Try to use only a single font
- **FONT SIZE:** Various sizes are okay, but use them in consistent ways (18 point for headers, 12 point for text, 14 point for sub-headers, et cetera)
- **FONT COLOR:** Again, various colors are fine, but be consistent, not erratic.
- **PHOTOS:** Develop a consistent way of presenting photos on your site (e.g., 400 pixels wide with variable height and a black, 1 pixel border)
- **LINKS:** While not always possible, it is good to have a single style for links (e.g., all links are blue and underlined)

Taken together, these can help your website or blog have a smooth, consistent look and feel.

Solid Branding

Branding consists of an organization's name and image, and how these entities are presented to others. Adhering to an agreed-upon visual and writing style will cultivate a deeper sense of your identity online. It will also make it easier for you to distribute the work of maintaining your website, Twitter feed, and/or Facebook page.

Cross-Linking

If you have more than one site, a blog, a Facebook page, or Twitter account that you're using, be sure to link to them. Cross-linking creates a solid sense of professionalism—that your thoughts and operations are well-coordinated and that you're legitimate.

One important note: if you're not regularly maintaining your presence on other sites, it's probably best not to link to them. Outdated or irrelevant information can make you look like you don't know what you're doing.

social media

"SOCIAL MEDIA" IS A TERM that didn't exist prior to 2004, but has now grown to be an essential element of what we do when creating any communications strategy. Whether you use blogs, Twitter, YouTube, or Facebook, these new mediums have managed to flip the formerly dominant communication paradigm on its head, making the large media players increasingly less important for getting out your message.

THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA has made it more possible than ever before to take what's important to you or your organization directly to the large and diverse audiences that are partaking in social media. Critical to the success of social media has been the fact that it allows each of us to communicate to many people (hundreds, sometimes thousands, and even millions) nearly instantly and at a very low cost. Moreover, that communication is two-way: users can communicate with you and with each other.

ARE YOUR STAKEHOLDERS ON FACEBOOK? Do they use Twitter? If yes, you should probably be there, too. The alternative is to be left out of conversations about your organization and the issues you care about. The discussion, debate, and information sharing is already taking place—with or without you.

TWITTER

What Is Twitter?

Twitter is a free social media tool for staying connected in real time. Users post messages ("tweets") of up to 140 characters, which others can read, respond to, or "retweet" (forward/distribute to others).

What Works on Twitter?

Some businesses and individuals have tried to use Twitter to shill goods and services, but Twitter success depends on listening to and engaging with stakeholders in an authentic way.

Your messages can be strictly professional or strictly personal, but the most successful Twitter feeds combine the two in a style that is casual, lively, and informative. Avoid using it to merely blast out impersonal announcements and self-promotional links to your own content.

Some examples of excellent feeds:

- twitter.com/EllnMllr
- twitter.com/ushahidi
- twitter.com/evgenymorozov

For other examples of Twitter use that may work for you and your group, see the Open Society Foundations' Twitter feed: twitter.com/OpenSociety.

Share, Inform, Discuss

Update regularly (at least daily), and engage, engage, engage. Share links and ideas, ask and answer questions—don't be constrained by the question Twitter asks users, "What are you doing?" In most cases, your followers are going to be interested in the interaction you can provide as well as the information.

Be Polite and Considerate

While this is generally a good rule of thumb for any type of engagement, it's especially important to keep in mind if you are tweeting in a professional capacity (or more or less tweeting in your organization's name). If it's appropriate behavior for the office, then it's probably okay for Twitter.

If you are tweeting on behalf of the Open Society Foundations, observe the same rules you would with official communications: i.e., don't violate lobbying restrictions, discuss confidential information, or use inappropriate language.

Profile Image

Bear in mind that your Twitter profile image space is tiny, so keep it simple. Moreover, because of the casual and conversational nature of the Twitter-sphere, a photo of yourself for your personal account is a good idea.

Choose a professional, well-designed background for your profile page.

Account and Username

We recommend setting up a personal Twitter account and using it for at least a month before creating a professional or organization-specific account. Authenticity and transparency matter on Twitter, so enter your real name and, if applicable, your position and organization in the appropriate fields.

Keep your username as short as possible. You only have 140 characters to type, so the fewer your name takes up, the better for retweeting. Avoid picking a name like "hopscotch54"— your username is what others see and identify as you, so it should reflect the professionalism and the person you are.

While you may want to tweet about your professional work on your personal account in accordance to whatever communications guidelines your organization may have, you shouldn't "brand" your personal account unless it's part of your overall Twitter strategy. For example, an Open Society Foundations employee would probably not want to use a Twitter name such as "OpenSocietySteve" for his personal account.

Link Shorteners

Sharing links with others is key in the Twitter-sphere. But because tweets are short and space is at a premium, URLs can be not only lengthy but unsightly. This is where online link shorteners

WHO SHOULD USE TWITTER?

Twitter is a powerful tool, but don't mistake it for a strategy. Use Twitter only if it helps you meet your program's specific communications goals. Consider the following questions:

- **Is the audience** you want to reach on Twitter? Ask your stakeholders where they tend to spend time online.
- **What specific goals** do you want to achieve with Twitter? What kind of messages do you want to post?
- **Do you have a strong desire** to interact with your constituents? Successful use of Twitter requires genuine engagement with your "followers."
- **Can you commit to posting**, reading, and responding to tweets for a few minutes, several times a day?

come in. They magically reduce a URL size by about half. Shorteners are free, plentiful, and they often incorporate other features such as tracking how many clicks your link gets. One of the most popular services is bit.ly; others include is.gd and snipr.com.

Hashtags

"Hashtags" allow you to create community on Twitter via keywords or abbreviations preceded by the pound sign (#). For instance, at the 2009 Personal Democracy Forum conference, participants marked their tweets about the conference with the hashtag "#pdf09." This made it easy for participants to connect with one another via Twitter, as well as allow those who were not at the conference to follow the action.

Keep hashtags as short as possible—lest they take up too much of your precious 140-word real estate. And before you create a hashtag, do a little research to find out if there is a hashtag about your topic that is already in use. The following website is a good place to start: hashtags.org

Listen

Part of what makes Twitter so popular is that it allows you to get news in real time, as it happens. So be sure to follow media outlets, grantees, and other like-minded organizations and individuals.

Twitter can also be a goldmine of information about your own organization, its reputation, and the issues you care about. Search by keywords and hashtags to monitor what others are saying about you.

Pace Yourself

It's a good idea to space your tweets out over the course of the day rather than sending a clump of them all at once. That way you will reach a variety of users who are on Twitter at various times throughout the day, and you will avoid annoying followers, who typically prefer that their feed not be monopolized by one user.

A good rule of thumb is to space out your posts by at least an hour. There are also tools that allow you to schedule tweets, so you don't have to go back and send them each time.

FACEBOOK

Perhaps the most important thing to realize is that building and maintaining a quality Facebook page requires time and effort. Simply creating a page isn't enough—you will need to update the page at least 2-3 times a week, and make a conscious effort to plan and strategize around your audience.

IS FACEBOOK RIGHT FOR YOU?

Before getting started, take a little time to consider the following questions:

- **Is the audience** you want to reach on Facebook? Ask your stakeholders where they tend to spend time online. Perhaps you would be better off using another medium such as Twitter, or simply a listserve.
- **What specific goals** do you want to achieve with a Facebook page? What kind of content do you want to post? What do you want readers to do with that information?
- **Do you have a strong desire** to interact with your constituents? Successful use of Facebook requires authentic, regular engagement with your page's "fans."

SAMPLE PAGES

The following are examples of well-executed Facebook pages:

- facebook.com/WorldWildlifeFund
- facebook.com/mashable
- facebook.com/americanprogress

Create a personal Facebook account before you create a presence for your organization. This will enable you to understand how the site and the culture work, and how you can be most effective.

Create a Page, Not a Cause or Group

An excellent post ("4 Facebook Tips for Nonprofit Success") by social media expert Frank Barry examines why it's better to create a Facebook "Page" (rather than the alternatives). In short, it gives you a profile that looks similar to those of individuals on Facebook but loads of tools that help make your page be all that it can be (e.g., targeted messaging, usage statistics).

Develop Your Content

Consider the possibility that many people may only interact with your organization through Facebook, not your website. With that in mind, your page should be curated at a level similar to your actual website: it should have a clear name, a clear purpose, clear messages, and clear actions for users to take. Developing those elements before you get to the "create page" button on Facebook can get your page off to a good start.

Post original content, pass along article links, post videos and photos, and ask questions; think of this as engaging your audience in a discussion. Solicit input and conversation among your "fans" by encouraging them to post their own photos (from related events, for example) and to add their thoughts about what you post.

Update your page at least once per day. Keep your status update text to one concise sentence. Anything longer is a little too dense for readability and clutters the users' feeds.

Growing Your Page's Membership

Your goal is to get members who are interested in your particular issue, not just people who feel compelled to join your page because you know them (or for some other reason). Recruit friends and other contacts who you think have an interest in your issues, and try to find other groups who are doing similar work and reach out to their members. When you post content to your page or start discussions, ask people to repost them to expand the conversation and your message's reach.

Consider Your Audience

Be thoughtful in how you invite people to your page and thank them if they choose to join, making all of your communication as personal as possible (the gold standard is reaching out to each person individually to say thanks for joining). Social media is personal and calls for interaction in a way that is generally more social and less formal and impersonal.

Language

Review all content before posting. Posts should be professional; a good rule of thumb is to not say anything you wouldn't say at a public event. In other words, don't violate any lobbying restrictions that may pertain to your organization, discuss confidential information, or use inappropriate language.

BLOGGING

What Is a Blog?

The word "blog" is short for "web log." A blog is a website (or portion of a website) that features a collection of posts (or entries), presented in reverse chronological order, written by an individual or group of individuals. Entries can be long or short, and can include photos, video, audio, or any combination thereof.

It's About the Information and Relationships

The most successful blogs convey not only information, but a sense of the personality of the organization and the people behind it. Don't shy away from letting your personality and sense of humor be reflected in what you write. That said, remember that it's the information that should be taking center stage.

OPEN SOCIETY BLOG

The Open Society Foundations have a global blog for our programs and foundations called the Open Society Blog (blog.soros.org). Its goals are listed below and may be relevant to your organization as well:

- **To raise the profile** of civil society voices and perspectives—particularly those of our grantees and our partners—that may not get the attention they deserve from other communications formats
- **To seed stories** online and in other media and influence the debates on our issues
- **To encourage and support** quality online dialogue about key open society issues
- **To enhance** the Open Society Foundations' reputation online while linking our experts, issues, and programs to the concept of open society and its ideals
- **To increase the transparency** of our work and promote current strategies and new thinking from our experts and programs

Create conversation. Solicit comments. Ask questions. Don't be afraid to be provocative (with the caveats mentioned in this section, of course). Respond to comments and questions from readers. Writing a blog post is only the beginning!

Identify Yourself

Let people know who you are and what your relationship is to the subject you're blogging on. You don't have to do this every time you write a post, but make sure that people can find this information easily. Write in the first person so that your views don't get confused with the organization under whose aegis you may be blogging. If you're blogging in a personal capacity, disclose any conflicts of interest. Private issues and topics should remain private, especially if they might jeopardize personal or work relationships.

Use Common Sense

Common sense is the best guide if you choose to post any information that might be related to your organization or the issues in which it is involved. If you comment on any aspect of your work, and in particular on a subject for which you have responsibility, you should clearly identify yourself as an employee and include a disclaimer that the views are your own and not those of the organization.

"What Should I Blog About?"

What do you want to talk about? Blogs are powered by authenticity and passion, so choose something that's important to you. In a professional context, this is your opportunity to share your expertise with others in a more informal, conversational manner.

Often a blog entry consists of a brief (2-3 paragraph) journal-style story or commentary, but there are many other kinds of posts to consider:

- **ROUNDUP OF LINKS** to what others are saying on a given topic
- **INTERVIEW WITH AN INTERESTING** grantee or colleague
- **SUMMARIZE A NEW REPORT** in a snappy, accessible way
- **ANSWER A QUESTION** or two that you get asked all the time
- **SUCCESS STORY**—your own or one from a grantee or partner
- **ADVOCACY:** a call to action on an issue or policy (without violating whatever lobbying restrictions may apply to your organization)
- **A LOOK BEHIND THE SCENES:** For example, what do you look for in an ideal grant candidate?
- **TELL A STORY** with photos or video—for instance, from a grantee site visit

Note that a blog is not the place for dry, formal material. The goal is interaction, so don't give your audience the "hard sell" either. Readers come looking for something extra—an inside look, up-to-the-minute information, dialogue—delivered with personality and passion.

Keep It Open

Respectful debate and disagreement are often at the heart of a successful blog. Keep comments on topic and open (although keep track of them). Respond to inquiries. Be available for the audience that you develop and for the people who respond to what you say. Do not delete comments unless they are obscene, threatening, spam, or repeatedly off-topic. For more on these issues, see the section "Managing User-Generated Content."

Permanence

Things you write on the web are far more permanent than you might imagine. Remember, when you're publishing a comment or a post, you may be asked about it years from now. Never delete content you've already published (see "Admit Your Mistakes" below).

Admit Your Mistakes

When you make a mistake that your readers catch, don't hide it; e.g., if you misspell an uncommon name and a commenter on your blog points it out, you might try striking it through and writing the correction next to it. Or if known information changes shortly after you make a post, there's nothing wrong with adding an "UPDATE:" section at the top or the bottom of your now outdated post. You're human . . . so is everyone else. We all make mistakes.

Link Generously

If you refer to information from another site, mention and link to it. In fact, links are encouraged in the blogosphere, because they heighten interconnectivity.

Short and Sweet

Break up big blocks of text into bite-sized paragraphs. If your post is long (over 1,000 words), consider breaking it up into a two- or three-part serial.

SOCIAL BOOKMARKING

On the web, "bookmarks" refer to links that users save for future reference. "Social bookmarking" means these links are public (they can also be set to private if necessary) and can easily be shared. They can be viewed chronologically, by keywords or "tags," by user, or via search engine. Descriptions or comments can be added to the links, and users can subscribe to each other's bookmarks via an RSS feed.

Because bookmarks are public, users can see who else has saved a given webpage and in turn see other users' bookmark lists. By connecting people in this way, it allows new communities to form based on shared interests.

Social bookmarking can also help make it easier to find a webpage. The more a page is bookmarked and tagged, the higher it can rise in search engine rankings.

In the context of the Open Society Foundations' work, social bookmarking is particularly useful because it makes it easy to collect, organize, discover, and share online resources, both within and outside our organization.

There are a variety of social bookmarking services. Delicious, which is one of the most popular sites, is a good place to start. Signing up is free, and the user interface is fairly simple.

WIKIPEDIA

If your site or project is producing information relevant to a particular Wikipedia entry (and the information is factual, mind you), consider adding it to the appropriate sections along with the proper citations. Wikipedia is successful precisely because experts from across the spectrum of human knowledge are willing to share their expertise for free. So your contributions are certainly appropriate—provided you observe the community's guidelines (more on that below).

Some argue that there are ancillary benefits to these contributions as well: that they can help boost your organization's search ranking (because Wikipedia is, in general, considered reputable). The truth is, however, that links from Wikipedia are tagged in such a way that they won't boost your site's ranking. You may, however, get more traffic to your site as a result of using your site as a citation on Wikipedia, even without the increase in Google's ranking.

Getting Started

Familiarize yourself with the conventions and culture of Wikipedia. Foremost among these is that you not charge in and create (or rewrite) an entry about yourself or your program. While it's true that anyone can post anything on Wikipedia, it's also the case that an army of dedicated Wikipedians will almost immediately edit or remove content that appears to violate the norms.

It's therefore strongly recommended that you start small by making minor, uncontroversial copyedits to an entry within your area of expertise (but not one that is directly about you or your organization). It takes a little time to build up trust within the community of Wikipedia volunteers. Take time to review Wikipedia's guides to editing and creating entries.

Wikipedia requires that contributors write from a neutral point of view. This means you should assert facts, including facts about opinions—but do not assert the opinions themselves.

Mind Your Netiquette

When updating Wikipedia, remain as diplomatic as possible. Remember that this is a public forum; anyone and everyone can see what you say and what you in particular have updated and, in most cases, your changes can be tracked back to you or your organization. Organized "conspiracies" (or things that look like conspiracies) to make vast amounts of changes could very likely be found out and potentially make you or your organization look very bad. Beware.

Let Go

Bear in mind that others can and will edit, add to, or otherwise change your Wikipedia content. It's a living document that belongs to no individual person or organization, and it will never sound like your own website. On the other hand, Wikipedia does have systems in place for dealing with vandalism.

MANAGING USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Once you start using social media tools, you will have to figure out how you'll manage user-generated content. In most cases, this refers to comments posted to your website, blog, or Facebook page.

It's important to have a clear policy in mind so that users can develop expectations; often when policies around user-generated content are poorly defined, comments may focus more on the site's "arbitrary" policies for managing comments and less on the site's content.

The following are the three main approaches to managing user-generated content:

- **BLOCK:** Used in instances where user response isn't manageable, appropriate, or expected to produce anything of value to your audience. For example, the Open Society Foundations have a strict policy against hate speech and prohibit these types of comments.

- **MODERATE:** Moderation means the site administrator reads every comment and approves (or denies) publication. This is the same model that established, mainstream publications such as the *New York Times* use. This helps keep comments on-topic, limit offensive or otherwise undesirable content, and generate or maintain content.
- **FREE:** This approach allows any visitor to post anything, perhaps with only limited exceptions for spam. The downside is that comments may become so unproductive or offensive that they preclude any other discussion that could happen.

The moderated approach is used for most Open Society Foundations sites.

When and How to Respond

If someone compliments your work online, that's a no-brainer: Thank them! But what should you do if someone leaves negative comments?

- **IF THE COMMENTER'S ASSERTIONS** are factually incorrect, offer corrections.
- **IF A USER POINTS OUT** a mistake you've made, apologize (if appropriate) and correct it.
- **IF THE REMARKS** are just grouchy or seem designed only to provoke a fight, it's perfectly fine–even advisable—to ignore them. Often other users will step in to respond.
- **IF YOU DO RESPOND**, identify yourself clearly (don't be a "sock puppet," i.e., someone who uses a pseudonym or hidden identity to post comments or criticisms), and don't say anything you wouldn't say (politely) in public.
- **IF A DEBATE OR ARGUMENT** gets heated, stick to addressing the merits of someone's ideas and avoid speculation and personal attacks.
- **IF SOMEONE LEAVES COMMENTS** that are repeatedly off-topic, it's all right to ignore or delete them.

websites

WEBSITES AND BLOGS CAN DO AMAZING THINGS, but at the end of the day they are just tools. They can help you achieve your goals, but they're only as good as the planning you put into them. Before getting into the thick of building or revamping a site, you should have a very clear idea of who you want to reach. This key bit of information will help guide you through the process of creating your site.

NEXT, THINK ABOUT WHAT YOUR STRATEGY FOR COMMUNICATING with and activating this group (or groups) will be. Start by developing goals for your site such as getting people to sign a petition, watch a short movie, or join your email list.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO KNOW EVERYTHING AT THE START, but understanding the paths that people will take (from knowing nothing about your issue, to becoming interested, to becoming active) will help you figure out how to organize your site. Clear goals make the process—and the outcome—significantly better for everyone involved.

CONTENT STRATEGY

The actual content of a website—photos, videos, and especially text—frequently comes as an afterthought. It might get cut-and-pasted in from a Word document, then forgotten, quickly becoming outdated. But like other web tools, content needs to be carefully deployed. From planning to creation to posting to revising, attention must be paid to whether the content helps you meet your specific goals. It's also a living piece of your site which needs to be periodically updated or have portions removed.

All the emphasis on technical innovations such as search engine optimization and analytics sometimes obscures the fact that your content must be high-quality. If you don't have smart, compelling, up-to-date material, there is little reason for others to visit your site.

CREATING OR REVAMPING A WEBSITE

Questions to Consider:

- **WHAT IS THE GOAL OF THE SITE?** How does it fit with your overall communications strategy?
- **DOES ANYTHING SIMILAR ALREADY EXIST** (either in or outside our organization)? If it does, would working with an existing presence be a better option?
- **WHAT COMMITMENT** are you willing to make to the site? Do you have the resources to keep the content updated? For how long?
- **DO YOUR PLANS ACCOUNT** for managing the growth and increasing demands of your website?
- **HOW WILL YOU MEASURE SUCCESS?** Set targets and benchmarks before you launch.

GETTING PEOPLE TO YOUR WEBSITE

Once you've got a website, you want to make sure that people visit it. Here are some tips on how to make that happen.

Search Engine Optimization

There are three general areas that affect your site ranking on search engines:

- **HOW A SITE** or page is coded;
- **THE CONTENT** of your page or site;
- **WHO IS LINKING** to your page.

Many of the suggestions below are related to the first two areas above (as the last area isn't under your control).

Relevancy

Search engines don't reward cleverness; they tend to reward obviousness. So, if your site is about skiing, your search engine prospects will be greatly enhanced by finding a way to include the word "skiing" in the title of the site (in text) and in various important places throughout the site. Make sure that you're frequently using the words that are relevant to your site—don't shy away from repeating yourself.

Search engines look at your site through the lens of your code. So, very often, there are things that you don't exactly "see" in the design of your site that are influencing its ranking. Google, for example, expects that the title of your page (that is, the thing that tells people what the page is about) is going to use an <h1> tag. If you choose not to use an <h1> tag, your site may be less favored than a site that does.

The content of the <h1> tag also matters. Continuing with the example used before, if one of your key pages is titled "A new ballgame," even though the focus is actually on improvements in ski design, you're missing a major opportunity to let the search engine know what this page is really about. Consider using the title "Parabolic Skis: A new ballgame." Not including the subject of the page in the <h1> tag can indicate to a search engine that, in our example, skis aren't really the important part of the page.

Keywords

A great tip is to pick 10-15 keywords that are the most likely search terms visitors would use to find your site. There's a bit of alchemy in this (there's no exact

CONTENT IS CRUCIAL

The book *Content Strategy for the Web* by Kristina Halvorson suggests five steps to significantly improved content:

- **Less is more.** Creating focused, concise content means better user experience (it's easier to find and do things) and easier site upkeep.
- **Do a content inventory.** Look at the content on your site. Assess its accuracy, quality, and strategic importance to help you revise/delete/create going forward.
- **Listen.** Find out what staff and outside users need and want from the site. You can't please everyone all the time, but this input can help determine priorities.
- **Put someone in charge.** If everyone's responsible for your content, no one's responsible. Deputize someone as an "editor-in-chief" to determine website priorities and enforce timelines and quality standards.
- **Ask "Why?"** The web makes it possible to publish an infinite amount of material, but excess content only hinders and frustrates users. For all content submitted or proposed, ask the person presenting it why they want to post it—what concrete strategic goal does it serve?

way to know what those words would be), but it's a good way to build a benchmark of what categories (i.e., searches) you want to try and get a piece of.

Once you have your list, try hard to incorporate those terms as often as you possibly can in your site. That doesn't mean creating dummy content or loading the bottom of the page with keywords, but it does mean making a conscious effort to consistently utilize those keywords wherever possible.

Tag Images

Use HTML to tag your photos so that search engines can "see" what the image is. You may have a great image of something very important, but if you don't tag it properly in HTML, all a search engine will see is the image's file name (e.g., DSC0121.JPG) and some surrounding text. Moreover, the visually impaired are also avid Internet users. Their screen readers depend on well-tagged images and lots of text. Without tags on your images, a huge swath of your site is not there for search engines and visually impaired users.

Stagnation Is the Enemy

Unless you are operating a site that is based largely in fixed fact (that is, something that talks about a specific event at a point in history or a specific person who is no longer living and whose life is not up for debate), not updating the site can be harmful to your search engine ranking.

Search engines tend to reward sites that are up-to-date; those websites with newer content that is relevant to a user's search will show up closer to the top of the results page. Now, this isn't an argument to load up your site with random, irrelevant content, but more of a call to arms to work hard to create relevant content about your subject area.

Build Relationships

Many search engines measure your site's value not only by the content on the pages, but by how many other sites are linking to yours (and the value of those sites). If a site with a high ranking links to your site, some of their site's value will be conferred onto your site. This relationship through links can help improve your ranking in search engines by showing search engines that your material is considered to be relevant content.

How do you get people to link to you? A little outreach can go a long way: simply email the contacts at sites that you think might benefit from linking to you and tell them about the content on your site that they might find interesting. This may not work in some cases (e.g., corporations with well-defined linking policies or competitors who have no interest in striking up a relationship), but it never hurts to do outreach.

You can establish and develop relationships with users by setting up an email newsletter, engaging with social media, developing the content on your site, and talking to other people who are in the same space as you. Don't fear getting feedback and making changes. Ultimately, people are what drive the Internet and make it work—so the relationships that you build with people on- and offline can really impact your site's traffic.

While building traffic to your site one visitor at a time isn't exactly feasible, if you work hard in building quality newsletters, a social media network, and a valuable website, you are far more likely to see a cascading, "word of mouth" effect (via the Internet), that will push the growth of your site.

Cheating

The temptation to "game the system" to try to manipulate results can be great. But the penalties for even trying to do so and getting caught can often result in being blacklisted from a search engine. Do so at your own peril.

An Ongoing Endeavor

Search engine optimization is not an exact science—each site's issues are different and the aforementioned tools are often used in varying combinations to try and solve them. It's also important to note that none of this is static—that is, just because you've managed to rise to the top of the results, things can and do change quickly; optimizing your search engine results is an ongoing endeavor.

LICENSING

Much of the content on the Internet is actually not free to use at your discretion. In almost every case, the use of photos, music, video, and text requires you to first get permission from the person or organization that owns the content before you do anything with it. Securing permission, which includes the possibility of having to pay for usage of materials, is crucial if you want to avoid lawsuits or other possible legal actions.

Of course, you don't always need to ask for permission to use something—there are legal provisions that allow for greater editorial flexibility, such as fair use and Creative Commons. For an example of Creative Commons licensing, see the Open Society Foundations' website terms and conditions at the bottom of the home page at www.soros.org.

WEB ANALYTICS: A BASIC PRIMER

From choosing and setting up a stats program, to understanding the data that you're looking at, starting to engage with your web statistics can be an enlightening process that tells you more than you ever imagined about who is visiting your site and for what reasons. The key is making time to pay attention to the data and truly make sense of it.

Choosing a Stats Program

The first thing you should know is that, unless you're running a large-scale e-commerce operation (or have a fundraising-driven website), your needs will almost certainly be satisfied by Google Analytics. First off, it's free. Secondly, it's pretty robust. It has most of what you need right out of the box, and with some minor modifications to your site, you can add many more features. Thirdly, many, many people use it, which gives you a huge built-in user community that can help you answer implementation questions.

In addition to Google Analytics, other good stats programs that you can use include:

- **PIWIK**–This requires some configuration on the server, but it's free, open source and, thus, extensible (that is, it is possible to make it better yourself).
- **GO STATS**–This is free and easy to add to your site, but it also requires that your site display a visitor counter that users can see: this is the weakest of the three options presented here.

For an extensive listing of programs, go to the stats program list on Wikipedia (Wikipedia: List of web analytics software)

Setting Up Your Stats

In order to set up any stats program on your site, you first need to either buy or sign up for one or more services. Once signed up, the provider should give you step-by-step instructions on how to install the software. All installations are not the same and some are much more complicated than others—so make sure that you evaluate that aspect of the service before signing up.

Data: What Does It All Mean?

Understanding the data that you're looking at, what is meaningful, and what isn't is hard even for seasoned professionals. Here are some entry points to your data, based on Google Analytics, that can help you gain some meaning from what you're looking at:

- **VISITS:** this is the number of times your site has been visited. If you have 1,000 visits, it is possible that 1 person visited 1,000 times, or that 1,000 different people visited (or any combination thereof).
- **PAGEVIEWS:** your site is made up of pages and pageviews is the total amount of times those pages have been viewed.
- **BOUNCES:** this statistic shows you the number of people who, upon landing on a page on your site, immediately left. A high bounce rate can mean that the content on your site isn't particularly relevant to people.
- **TIME ON SITE:** This shows the average amount of time that people are spending on your site. Looking at this in conjunction with bounces can help give you an idea if you're providing people with information that they're interested in.
- **NEW VS. RETURNING:** this is the number of people who are coming to your site more than once (during the specified time period). This can be helpful in determining whether or not you're developing a loyal following for your content.

Caveat Emptor

Remember, web statistics are far from infallible. There are currently debates about what constitutes a unique visitor, a pageview, and, among many other issues, how these things are most accurately tracked. That doesn't mean that the data you get is bunk, but it's important to remember that your data doesn't do all of the work for you, and if you intend to rely on it to make decisions, you should understand the weaknesses and strengths of your particular analytics program.

words

VARIOUS STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT A LARGE MAJORITY OF WEBSITE VIEWERS either quickly scan most web page texts or give them a very cursory reading. Only a small number of users actually read web pages word-by-word, with average users only reading about 20 percent of the words on any given page. People tend not to read extensively online. They're looking for key information, and if they don't find it within a few seconds, they move on.

Because the Open Society Foundations work with diverse groups of people who come from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds and often speak English as a second language, clear and accessible content is not just good communications strategy, it embodies the very nature of our organization.

WRITING FOR THE WEB

Writing for the web is different from writing for print publications. Because people tend to quickly scan when reading online, there are five important things you can do to maximize the impact and effectiveness of your web content:

- Keep it direct and to the point. Users are goal-oriented; if they don't see what they're looking for within a few seconds, they move on. Therefore, writing should be brief and focused; start with the most important information at the top of the page.
- Cut it in half. Large blocks of content and long pages will not only likely go unread, but actually impede readers from finding what they need. Text should be reduced by about 50 percent less than what would appear in print.
- Break into bite-size pieces. Create meaningful subheads and bullet points (like the list you're looking at now!) to break up text chunks. Again, these make it easier for hurried, distracted users to scan.
- Make those words count. Titles and short descriptions should also be concise and contain meaningful keywords to help optimize for search engines as well as comprehension. Often users read only the page title

MAKING EVERY SECOND COUNT

Most website users are scanning, not reading. How can you engage them effectively?

- **Get right to the point.** Place the most important information at the top of the page.
- **Keep words and sentences** short and engaging.
- **Incorporate keywords,** especially those your users might type in as search terms.
- **Reduce your page text** by 50 percent. Then cut it in half again.
- **Create meaningful subheads** and bullet points to break up text chunks.

(e.g., if they've done a Google search), so it is essential to convey the main topic of the page.

- Keep it simple and accessible. Because readers vary in educational background and command of the English language, express yourself simply. Avoid "insider" lingo; if you absolutely must use a technical word or acronym, briefly define it. Rule of thumb: Your parents (and other nonspecialists) should be able to understand what you've written. Don't worry that you are "dumbing down" content—everyone benefits when you communicate in a transparent, engaging style.

Linking

When designed properly, links highlight pieces of text to visually convey the action "click here." Thus, there is no need, when linking to something, to add the actual text "click here." Instead, simply link the relevant text to the URL. This helps the user understand immediately what the link is for, and keeps your text shorter (saving time for your reader).

Be specific about where the link will take the reader. Whenever possible, use the actual name of the item you're referencing.

> **AVOID:** We will be discussing George Soros's new book about globalization.
>
> **AVOID:** Click here to view George Soros's new book.
>
> **USE:** We will be discussing George Soros's new book *On Globalization*.

In cases where you need to spell out the address of a website, remove the "http://" from the beginning. Thus, http://www.cnn.com should instead be www.cnn.com

Formatting

Go easy on the italics, bold, or UPPERCASE words. They can crowd the text, actually defeating the purpose of calling the words out. Better to break the text up and use subheads, if possible.

Editing

Carefully review your content before it's published. Better yet, ask someone else to proofread it with a fresh pair of eyes. For questions about style, punctuation, or other writing conventions, Open Society Foundations staff consult *The Chicago Manual of Style* and the Open Society Foundations' in-house editorial style guide.

Every Page Is Your Homepage

The vast majority of visitors to your website will not come through your homepage. Most will find you via a search engine or social media, which take the user directly to the relevant page. It's commonly said today that "every page is your homepage," meaning every page should offer the context and navigation appropriate to a first-time visitor to your site. Don't spend the bulk of your time and resources on your homepage design and content, while neglecting the rest of your site.

THE OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS WORK TO BUILD VIBRANT AND TOLERANT DEMOCRACIES WHOSE GOVERNMENTS ARE ACCOUNTABLE TO THEIR CITIZENS.

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Discussion, debate, and information sharing are taking place online—with or without you.

This practical guide provides standards, strategies, and suggestions that will help you participate and guide your work online.

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