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Networks for Good Works

By Joel M. Podolny

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Network for

Most people think of networking as a means for advancing their own self-interest. But successful social innovators take a different tack, nurturing close ties between members and infusing their networks with a common set of values. As a result,



by JOEL M. PODOLNY

THINK ABOUT THE LAST TIME A PERSON TOLD you that he or she was going to do some networking. Did you feel slightly repulsed? A little wary?

To most, the term “networking” means using other people to get what we want. But moral philosophies, religious traditions, and social conventions tell us not to treat people as means to our ends. Recall, for example, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s second categorical imperative, which advises “Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.”¹

More than 200 years after Kant published these words, sociological studies verify that when people attempt to build networks – even for good deeds – they convert relatively few to their cause. For instance, the directors of six arts organizations in Oklahoma City failed to convince their boards to form an alliance in part because they overemphasized how the new network could be used to raise more funds.²



CONNECTING FOR CHANGE: (far left, below) *Child Relief and You (CRY)*, an Indian grant-making organization, funds programs that help poor children. (center) In June 1964, Staughton Lynd, director of the Mississippi Freedom Schools, trains teachers for Freedom Summer in Oxford, Ohio. (near left) City Year corps members end a meeting with a cheer in Boston.

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good works

their networks power both personal transformations and large-scale social changes.

At the same time, sociological studies also show that networks power social change. From the civil rights movement³ to the American labor movement,⁴ from the Zapatista movement⁵ to the Howard Dean campaign,⁶ wide webs of people dedicated to a common cause are what change the course of human history.

If networks are necessary for social change, but networking is repugnant, what's a social crusader to do? Kant's second categorical imperative offers a hint: The problem with networking lies not in treating people as means, but in treating people *only* as means. And so to follow Kant's reasoning, social change agents should treat networks *not only* as means to social change, *but also* as ends unto themselves.

Too often, those of us who study and rely on networks think of them as mere means, as the conduits and pipes through which information and resources flow. Networks are how we get stuff. They are the means by which we find out about threats and opportunities. They are the means by which we get capital of all

kinds – financial, physical, and human. They are the means by which we learn.

Although this view of networks is not wrong, it is incomplete. Networks aren't just pipes; they are also communities that should be nurtured and valued as such – as ends unto themselves. And advocates of social change, in turn, should view themselves as guardians of those communities, rather than just the people who lay the pipes. When society's movers and shakers cast themselves as guardians of communities, the communities themselves become the agents of change.

The Ties That Energize

On Oct. 29, 1983, the Netherlands witnessed the largest demonstration in its history. One out of every 25 of the nation's 14 million inhabitants turned out to protest NATO's deployment of cruise missiles in Europe. Before the demonstration, two soci-

PHOTOGRAPHS (LEFT TO RIGHT) COURTESY OF CRY; THE HERBERT RANDALL FREEDOM SUMMER PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION; MCCAIN LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES; THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI; AND ANDREW DEAN

ologists, Bert Klandermans and Dirk Oegema, both of Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, set out to discover why some people would ultimately take to the streets while others would take to their sofas.

The researchers telephoned a random sample of 114 people three days before the demonstration and learned that a full 74 percent of the respondents agreed with the demonstration's goals.⁷ After the event, the researchers called the same respondents back and asked if they had attended the protest. They found that only 4 percent of the people sympathetic to the movement had acted on their principles. Like many other studies from

around the world, this Dutch study shows that just because people believe in a movement does not mean that they will participate in it. Most citizens become stereotypical free riders, calculating that their participation will make little difference to the overall movement.

So what *does* lead people to act on their beliefs? Stanford University sociologist Doug McAdam's study of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964 highlights the importance of people's social networks in shaping their actions.⁸ For the Freedom Summer Project, hundreds of primarily white college students drew attention to civil rights violations and helped register black voters in Mississippi. The volunteers' work was arduous and dangerous. They first received a week of training in the small town of Oxford, Ohio, before traveling to Mississippi. Most of the volunteers then lived in the impoverished conditions of the African-American families whose situation they were working to improve. Within the first 10 days of their arrival in Mississippi, three volunteers were kidnapped and killed. As the sum-

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A Freedom Summer volunteer sings at an Independence Day fish fry in Hattiesburg, Miss. The 1964 event, which marked the beginning of Freedom Summer in Hattiesburg, was one of many that cemented ties between civil rights workers.

mer progressed, others were threatened, beaten, and arrested.

The Freedom Summer Project initially accepted 959 applicants for volunteer positions, out of a total of 1,068. But only 720 of the accepted applicants showed up for training in Ohio. McAdam wanted to know, *What happened to the other 239 accepted applicants?*

To find out what separated the campaigners from the nonstarters, McAdam combed through all of the accepted people's applications and interviewed many of them decades later. He found that applicants who were already tied to communities dedicated to the civil rights movement – including those of teachers, religious groups, and liberal Democrats – were more than 75 percent more likely to show up for training than were those without such a tie. On the other hand, applicants who had strong, preexisting ties to people who did not back the movement – such as unsupportive parents – were much less likely to attend the training in Ohio. In other words, the more deeply people are embedded in networks whose values are aligned with a social movement, the more willing they are to participate in that movement.⁹

How Networks Work

Why does it take a network to plant boots on the ground? As we go through life as individuals, we sense that our internal beliefs, values, intentions, motivations, and passions – that is, our identities – are what drive our actions. Yet we often fail to recognize that our identities have to come from somewhere. And that somewhere is not our stomach or our spleen or even our brain. Instead, our identities ultimately come from our relationships with other people – that is, from our networks.

Before Freedom Summer, for example, the students whose parents were against civil rights had already formed identities that were not wholly aligned with the movement, partly because of their relationship with their parents. Students whose parents were for civil rights, in contrast, had already formed pro-movement identities, partly through their relationships with their par-

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE HERBERT RANDALL FREEDOM SUMMER PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, MCCAIN LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES, THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

ents. Our networks shape and change our identities. And though our parents are but one influence on our multifaceted selves, they are, nonetheless, a powerful force with which we contend.

Our identities, in turn, drive our actions. Internalized from our networks, our identities tell us what is right and wrong; what we desire and what we eschew; whom we help and whom we ignore; whom we obey and whom we resist; when we act and when we stay on the sofa. Once people join a network, their identities are changed in such a way that they act consistently with group values, without being rewarded or monitored.

During Freedom Summer, networks were not particularly important as conduits of information or resources. Volunteers did not need many resources, and they obtained most of their learning through their formal training in Ohio. Instead, the networks affected the volunteers' identities, and those identities spelled out what needed to be done and how to do it. The volunteer who is tightly bound to other volunteers does not calculate the costs and benefits of her efforts. Rather, her identification with the community compels her to take part, even if it means risking her own life. As the great sociologist Emile

AMPLIFYING CHANGE

An Interview With Howard Rheingold

Howard Rheingold is a longtime commentator on the social and cultural impacts of new technology. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Virtual Community* and *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*. He served as editor of *The Whole Earth Review* and founding executive editor of *HotWired*. SSIR senior editor Alana Conner Snibbe caught up with Rheingold to chat about how technology is changing the course of social action.

How is technology altering the way we network for social change?

One of the things that we saw very recently was the president of the United States pledging some ridiculously low amount of money to the victims of the Asian tsunami. But when citizens contributed more than that via Amazon.com in 24 or maybe 36 hours, the U.S. [government] upped its ante. And after Hurricane Katrina, a blog put people together with relatives from whom they were separated.

Certainly election processes all over the world have dramatically changed. In the recent Korean election, the president was elected even though he was losing in the exit polls because an online network of citizen journalists got a last-minute get-out-and-vote campaign going.

And then during the SARS epidemic, the Chinese government tried to keep a lid on the news that people were dying of this new disease, but 150 million text messages were sent from telephone to telephone within three days, so [the

government] couldn't keep a lid on it. So people can now organize faster, with people they weren't previously able to reach, and at scales they weren't able to achieve.

What other impacts are these technological changes having on society besides making it much easier to communicate?

One of the things that we're seeing is the acceleration of globalization. You can live in India and work in the U.S. The food that subsistence farmers in parts of the world eat is no longer grown locally, because it's cheaper to buy it off the ship. Jobs are being outsourced from one country to another almost overnight. All of those things are dramatic changes in the fundamental ways that people make a living. Many people just barely at the top of the poverty line are able to make it into the middle class because of those changes, but others are being left out. That's certainly a huge amount of change, for good and ill.

So organization of all kinds is being enabled by the technological infrastructure. But equally important is, what do people think of doing, and can they convince other people to go along with it? And there the power of the story becomes very important.

Why is the story important?

You could believe it's a good thing to make some kind of social change or policy change, but building something like the civil rights movement is a long and painful process. That took decades. It had a lot of casualties, but it also had a powerful story, a powerful idea: "If you're for human freedom from bondage, come with me." And "we know we're right, so eventually we will win." If you look at photographs [from the era], you see these kids standing in front of dogs and big mean cops. But they had a powerful story.

You can't divorce the content from the medium. But if you've got a strong story, we now have media for enabling relatively small groups to amplify it.



Networks Online and On-land

by ALLISON FINE

This past spring, tens of thousands of high school students in Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Houston gathered up their friends to protest harsh new anti-immigration laws. Using a panoply of technology tools, such as MySpace, blogs, e-mails, and text messages, the students organized their friends to walk out of school and take to the streets. Congress listened to them, as well as to their parents, and softened its legislation.

When social networks are lubricated by interactive digital tools like Web sites, blogs, and text messaging, connected activism has arrived. The ability of people to link to many others, inexpensively and quickly, makes organizing like-minded people for elections and causes easier than ever before. Connected activism also routinely crosses geographic, economic, generational, racial, and ethnic lines, crashing through barriers at breakneck speed.

But are virtual organizations really any different from place-based groups? Consider MoveOn.org, the online politi-

cal action committee. MoveOn has more than 3 million members, but it has fewer than 10 full-time staff. MoveOn contacts its membership several times each week by sending e-mail updates, forwarding petitions, piloting ads, and, yes, soliciting donations for specific campaigns. Members, in turn, can contact each other online and through local house parties and other events in cities across the country.

In contrast, old-style membership organizations usually have much larger staffs, update members more sporadically, solicit donations more formulaically, and offer very few opportunities for members to connect with one another directly.

Large, national efforts like MoveOn aren't the only ones taking advantage of online social networks. Save Passamaquoddy Bay is an all-volunteer effort of Americans, Canadians, and Native Americans to protect the Quoddy region between Maine and Canada from development.

The group exists entirely online and uses the same social media tools as

MoveOn – at virtually no cost except for volunteers' time.

Connected activism is not confined to online. Since 2001, Meetup.com has been working at the intersection of online and on-land activism, connecting more than 2 million people through more than 100,000 local clubs, dedicated to everything from pug dogs to Elvis to libertarianism. Relationships are started online and then are strengthened and deepened by in-person activities.

Scott Heiferman, a co-founder of MeetUp, sums up the thinking of many connected activists. "How do you start an association today?" he asks. "Do you need a building in Washington? No, you go online."

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Durkheim noted, when humans have to choose between saving their identity or their own skins, they usually opt to save their identity. For what is a human life without identity?¹⁰

Networking for Children in India

To forge new identities for social change, leaders must nurture their networks around a set of clear values and a strong culture that communicates those values. Rippan Kapur instinctively understood this. Kapur was the charismatic founder of Child Relief and You (CRY), an Indian grantmaking organization that aims to improve the lives of underprivileged children. With Shalinee Sharma, a Harvard University MBA student, I am exploring how CRY became one of the largest and most well known NGOs in India.

Founded in 1979, CRY is an early example of what we now call "high-engagement philanthropy," providing not just funding, but also technical assistance, human resource training, help in community mobilization, and broad-scale coordination of the organizations that CRY aids. CRY does not provide direct services itself. Instead, it focuses almost exclusively on connecting people with money to people with skills. In the last 25 years, CRY has supported 500 organizations and affected the lives

of 1.37 million children in India, according to the most recent estimates.

In CRY's early years, the force of Kapur's personality innervated the organization's network with a commitment to "restor[ing] the dignity of a child's life, to give him or her every opportunity to grow and develop," as he said. "He was fanatical in his devotion to the issue of children's welfare," said Nandan Maluste, a long-standing CRY board member. "He was known to argue with anyone and everyone until they were persuaded of his view.

"[Kapur] also had tremendous energy," Maluste continued. "A phone call at eight in the evening asking for support could easily end in the early hours of the morning." Kapur had daily interactions with staff, during which time they came to know well his personal philosophy: "What I can do, I must." His enthusiasm and passion were contagious, staff reported. As with Freedom Summer, people's strong personal ties to Kapur often preceded their commitment to the cause.

Treating a network as an end does not imply that it should never change. As CRY grew, Kapur knew that he needed to draw in people with business knowledge. When he decided to change the leadership team from a group of volunteers who were mostly friends and family to a professional staff, he was not



Rippan Kapur, founder of CRY, gathers with children whom his organization aims to aid. CRY's culture preserves Kapur's devotion to children's welfare and his passionate energy.

afraid to let many of the older staff leave. At the same time, he took care to build bridges between the remaining old guard and the new hires. For the first time, Kapur had to manage “tremendous diversity within the organization, comprising old and new, generalists and specialists, social activists and marketing professionals, techies and Luddites, rationalists and emotionalists,” reflected Pervin Varma, a former CEO of CRY who was a senior staffer at the time of the transition. What united the staff was their strong loyalty to Kapur and their faith that if he was committed to professionalizing CRY, then they should give it a chance (and often a second chance).

After Kapur's death in 1994, the organization had to figure out how to keep its founder's values and culture alive. A first step was for the leadership to articulate explicitly that CRY is not just a charity that raises money for children. Rather, it is a force for building a children's rights movement in India. This realization became a source of inspiration and alignment for the staff.

It also inspired the organization's subsequent social justice agenda. For example, CRY spearheaded a coalition of more than 2,500 grassroots organizations that successfully lobbied the Indian Parliament to amend the Indian constitution, making free and compulsory education for children ages 6 to 14 the state's responsibility and the child's legal right.

Subsequent CRY leaders actively nurtured CRY's culture. Varma first documented Kapur's life story to solidify his example as a part of the orga-

nization. Kapur's story now appears on CRY's Web site and marketing materials. Through Varma's efforts, Kapur's example of an ordinary person who sought to do extraordinary things continues to inspire CRY's stakeholders.

Serving With City Year

One need not travel to India to find social change organizations that treat their networks as ends. City Year, a youth service organization founded in Boston by Michael Brown and Alan Khazei, knows how to build a value-rich network of social champions. City Year draws together teenagers and young adults for one year, during which time they give back to their communities through diverse activities – from helping out in school classrooms to cleaning up parks to building homes for those in need. Since its start in 1989, City Year has expanded to dozens of U.S. cities and was the inspiration for AmeriCorps, a U.S. program that enlists citizens in national community service.

Like Kapur, Brown and Khazei are doggedly and publicly committed to their organization's core values: diversity and service. “They wear their passion on their sleeve, and it draws you in,” reported one senior staff member. Their energy “convert[s] people to City Year.”

City Year fosters a culture that reflects and reinforces these values. Like CRY, City Year relies heavily on inspirational storytelling, issuing its recruits an 82-page booklet of quotes and stories about hope, diversity, sacrifice, and service. Called



On Opening Day, City Year recruits take a pledge to serve their community for one year. City Year's uniforms, rituals, and stories instill shared values and esprit de corps in its members.

PHOTOGRAPHS (TOP) COURTESY OF CRY, (BOTTOM) BY JIM HARRISON

“Founding Stories,” the collection includes quotes from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela; proverbs from the Iroquois, Zulu, and Igbo people; and stories of Swedish, Judaic, and American origin.

To instill a sense of shared identity, City Year also requires its staff and corps to wear uniforms, perform calisthenics together every morning, and write cheers and raps about their teams and service. New staff members attend week-long summer retreats designed to inculcate the vision, values, and culture of City Year.

The operational nuts and bolts of City Year communicate its values as well. To promote diversity, the organization recruits people of all races, socioeconomic statuses, regions, and residences, and has even developed different recruiting methods for its diverse target populations. Members serve in small groups of 10 to 12, which encourages leadership,

improves accountability for service, and builds long-term bonds between people of different backgrounds. “I never realized how sheltered I was, how I used to stereotype people who were different from me,” reported one City Year team member. “When you work with people, really work hard together, your attitudes change.”

As its early successes mounted, City Year was urged to expand to cities other than Boston. Brown and Khazei deliberated about whether to form a loose syndicate of City Year affiliates – the model adopted by most national nonprofits. Instead, they decided that City Year required a strong center. “Because the value that we add – our culture, our experience, our central ideas – was not easily transferable, that argued for stronger coordination,” said Khazei. “You can’t put City Year into a manual.”

When the organization spread to new cities, its founders

The Good, the Bad, and the Networked by JOHN ARQUILLA

Networks are tools, as good or as bad as those who use them. During the past dozen years, social networks have shown a remarkably bright side, spreading liberal political practices far more effectively than the use of force ever could have. From aid to the Mexican Zapatistas in 1994; to the deepening democratization of South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines; to the nonviolent “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, networks are changing the world for the better.

Yet during this same period, networks have also been used for the darker purposes of terror, insurgency, and crime. The network form, easy to build, sustain, and enlarge, is well suited to waging war against hierarchically organized nation-states. This has led to a new form of warfare – “netwar” – which is waged by many small cells of combatants who constantly coordinate and communicate with each other, often without any central control or chain of command.

Bands of Chechen fighters pioneered netwar in 1996 when they took

on the Russian army in open battle, ultimately driving it out of the region. Hezbollah’s network of militants adopted a similar approach in 2000, forcing Israeli forces to withdraw from southern Lebanon.

To be sure, the Russians reentered Chechnya, and the Israelis reentered Lebanon this past summer. But both met remarkably intransigent foes – despite their more extensive resources and training.

Networks are tough opponents for hierarchical militaries to combat. The basic edge networks have is that they move information far more quickly than militaries with traditional chains of command, allowing their small, often lightly armed fighting cells to land repeated jabs, all the while slipping past the heavy punches of their bulky opponents.

As the sixth year of the first great war between nations and networks wears on – its major campaigns being the “global war on terror,” ongoing insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the recent conflict in Lebanon – all the evidence suggests that even the

most powerful nations cannot avoid networks. Indeed, the very profusion of networks today suggests that we have moved away from the arms races that typified the Cold War, and toward a new organizational race.

The new races are to build networks, rather than just weapons systems. Terrorists and transnational criminals have a huge head start, as nation-states are only now beginning to build effective information-sharing networks of their own. The challenge faced by the United States and other nation-states is to recognize this, and to begin transforming themselves along more networked lines.

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very carefully cultivated each site, making sure that the area was diverse enough to give rise to a diverse corps, that the city was gung-ho, and that there was enough of a funding base to support the organization.

More Than Matchmaking

Kapur, Brown, Khazei, and the leaders of the civil rights movement threw their hearts and minds not only into the pursuit of their goals, but also into the cultivation of their networks. All too often, however, leaders of social change see their role as mere matchmakers. Community foundations, for example, count as network organizations, in that they coordinate autonomous units to operate as a single, larger entity.¹¹ Like CRY, community foundations stay out of direct service provision and instead amass a network of funders to support diverse service providers. And like both CRY and City Year, leaders of community foundations put creating a network first.

Yet community foundations are distinct from CRY and City Year in that their values are quite broad. Absent specific, well-defined values with bite, a community will not transform the identity of its members. And if a community does not transform the identity of its members, it will not give rise to the actions that are necessary for significant social change.

I recognize that not all social sector leaders are focused on social change. Many are focused on meeting ongoing needs. For these leaders, networks may indeed be important primarily as conduits of information and resources.

But if social change is the objective, networks must transform the identities of the people who make them up. To make this transformation happen, leaders must first and foremost understand their role as nurturers of networks. Playing this role requires putting together a network, infusing it with clear values, and, when necessary, shifting its composition to ensure that it remains a platform for social change. □

This article is based on a speech that the author wrote and delivered at the 2005 Skoll World Forum, Oxford University, Oxford, England.



Led by City Year corps members, a team of volunteers from T-Mobile brightens up an elementary school in Los Angeles. Over the course of City Year, members internalize the core values of diversity and service. One member reported: "I never realized how sheltered I was, how I used to stereotype people who were different from me. When you work with people, really work hard together, your attitudes change."

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