Maintaining a Web site to fight child abuse

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1. Introduction

Ever get the feeling that 'everyone' has a Web site? Having a Web and e-mail address has become essential on business cards. People are swapping e-mail addresses as much (or more than) phone numbers. Realistically, not everyone has a site, and many South Africans are not on the Internet yet, approximately 1.04 million people (2.4% of the overall population) in November 1998, according to NUA, with Internet growth slowing (1999:Online). However, the Internet is becoming more and more available to the general community and virtual communities are springing up. The Internet seems to reflect real-life groupings through these virtual communities, with like-minded people finding each other, with the traditional geographical constraints falling away.

The Internet is also being used to reach out to communities. Although this method often does not replace the current methods, it can be used as an enhancement. 'CHANGE. It's the buzzword of the 1990s. But how can *you* make it happen? How can your organization take steps to create a better community, a better world? The answer is by working with others. By collaborating. By recognizing that today's biggest problems affect everyone in our communities, and that we can find solutions if we work together' (League of Women Voters Education Fund 1998:Online). And what better way of working together, than reaching out globally?

'What this means for community organizations seeking to bring about lasting change is simple. It means it's time *right now* to recognize the demographic shifts that are under way in our communities and our country and to reach out to diverse audiences that can help us shape solutions for the common good. Our goal should be to create communities of inclusion – communities that work together and that reach across the lines of race, ethnicity and

economics to build a better future' (League of Women Voters Education Fund 1998:Online). Another barrier break is the geographical barrier. While the more traditional methods may include worldwide conferences, as a general rule activities are restricted to a specific country. With the World-Wide Web (WWW) instant communication with people in different countries is made possible, and an informative Web site can take away the need to explain an organisation and its areas of expertise to each and every enquirer. He or she can simply be directed to the site.

2. Communities

2.1 What is a community?

Some definitions have been extracted from Webster's Dictionary (1993:233):

- A unified body of individuals
- The people with common interests living in a particular area
- A group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together by a common policy
- A group linked by common policy
- A body of persons of common and especially professional interests scattered through a larger society.

2.2 Internet community

There are two possible definitions of an Internet community, which can be taken from the above:

- A body of individuals that have been unified through contact through the WWW, or a body of persons of common and especially professional interests scattered globally and inter-connected through the WWW.

The first definition is more applicable to the more casual browsers who connect through chat rooms and other communication forums, such as mail groups. The second definition is more applicable to those that have a specific aim for being on the WWW, such as people (usually belonging to an organisation) using the forum for community out-reach forums and who are looking for similar, like-minded organisations and people.

There are several Internet communities available. These provide virtual 'places' for like-minded people to 'hang out' together, chat, exchange messages and provide links to other common places of interest. One example is Six Degrees (www.sixdegrees.com). Six Degrees is an online community that gives people the opportunity to connect their own friends / contacts and to communicate with others through online chat, groups (specific to various interests) and a bulletin board. General member information is available. Various services are also provided, such as a 'job finder' and the ability to advertise.

2.3 Community information

Bunch (1982:2) provides two types of information provided by a community information service:

- Survival information such as that related to health, housing, income, legal protection,

economic opportunity, political rights etc.

- Citizen action information, needed for effective participation as individual or as member of a group in the social, political, legal, economic process.'

Edwards (Bunch, 1982:2) defines community information as follows: 'Community information is considered to be that information required by members of the public to make effective use of the resources potentially available to them in the communities in which they live.'

2.4   Current ways of reaching the community specific to child abuse and SASPCAN

Advertising and awareness campaigns are conducted through TV, radio, newspaper and magazine advertisements and stories. There also advice centres available, with many organisations providing both telephonic and 'face-to-face' support and advice. Ways of providing information, specifically used by The South African Society for Child Abuse and Neglect (SASPCAN) are:

- Research throughout the country
- Initiatives
- Programmes
- Resource centre (new office) – will collect information on resources throughout the country like programmes or clinics.
- Annual conference – main way of bringing together information.

3. **Networking**

'A network is any group of individuals or organizations who, on a voluntary basis, exchange information or undertake joint activities and who organize themselves in such a way that their individual autonomy remains intact' (Starkey, 1997:14).

3.1   Using the Internet to reach the community through networking

'In an ideal world, development networks would not be necessary, for individuals and organizations would be well linked vertically and horizontally with colleagues involved in similar areas' (Starkey, 1997:14). The Internet is an ideal forum to start to provide the links. Organisations can link together through Web rings, and providing links off their pages. 'Networks can overcome [communication] problems by allowing people and organizations to exchange information and experiences with those outside their immediate working environment and cooperate with them in a legitimate and non-threatening way' (Starkey, 1997:15). The Internet provides a forum to communicate, link Web sites and share information. Information can be updated quickly. The phone numbers or contact details of organisations need to be updated as when they change. The latest information on developing policies can also be provided, giving people a chance to comment timeously.

Realistically there are still more 'have-nots' than 'haves' in South Africa when it comes to using the Internet. Therefore when it comes to reaching the community, or community projects, the Internet is not replacing traditional methods, but is being used for enhancement. Especially when dealing with the disadvantaged people of South Africa, particularly when dealing with abuse, many members of the 'target audience' do not have access to the Web. Therefore, sites can be used to provide information and to pull professionals and potential

volunteers together, and to provide support to the few who can access the Web, but should never be used as a replacement. SASPCAN will be used later in this paper as an example for networking through the Internet in South Africa, specifically to reach out to a professional audience and potential volunteers.

Some other methods besides Web sites are available:

E-mail*:* E-Mail can take direct advantage of networking instead of telling one person at a time. The sender's entire e-mail list can be accessed. E-mail also allows virtually instant and barrier-free communication. An example of how effective e-mail can be is an e-mail that was sent around, supposedly about a little girl with cancer. There was a plea to forward the mail to as many people as possible, as there would be a donation for each address reached. This e-mail was sent to group lists, and was so successful that it took down the mail server of a big organisation. A message can be sent around the world, and forwarded to many more people than those on the original recipient list.

Newsgroups or list servers: Newsgroups and list servers enable contact among specific people who subscribe to them. All the people on the list server's list will receive an update, and people subscribing to news groups go to fetch their mail, and at times receiving updates. An example of a list server is ONElist, available on www.onelist.com. It is a free service that allows users to create and manage e-mail lists.

Mail forums: Mail forums are often hosted by specific Web sites, and at times are compared to bulletin boards. They can be used to spread information, and to seek help. A young Chinese boy's life was saved through this medium. In October 1997 a Chinese man in Perth posted an e-mail on a Web page created by a Swedish human-rights activist. His son had a rare and dangerous heart disease. A woman in America picked up the message and with the help of others, managed to arrange funds for the family to travel to America, and a doctor for the needed operation. On the 22nd of July 1998 the operation was successfully performed, and the child's life was saved (McConnell, 1999:30).

Free services: Many services provided on the Internet are free. There are free mailing lists, there is no charge for setting up and using newsgroups, chat rooms are free, and can even be linked to a specific Web site (for example, Xoom at www.xoom.com). There are also many sites providing 'applets' that can be used to enhance a Web site, and free e-mail address, such as Hotmail, found at www.hotmail.com.

Web rings: Web rings are a way of linking a group of Web sites. They are sites that have something in common, like support groups for adult abuse survivors and child abuse. A link is provided from each Web to another member's Web.

3.2 Do not become too dependent on electronic means

The Web is not replacing previous formal methods; it is adding an additional dimension. 'Only people with easy access to computers and e-mail can join electronic discussion groups... it's users are still mainly people in privileged organisations, and e-mail groups tend to be rather elitist' (Starkey, 1997:25).

'Nevertheless, e-mail can be quite a levelling technology. Once connected, a young worker in a small rural NGO has the same access to the electronic discussions as a university professor or the directory of a large government department' (Starkey, 1997:26).

It is very tempting to feel that the Internet, e-mail and computers can solve many of the communication problems between organisations. It is imperative however, to remember that

the whole world is not electronic and, in South Africa where there are areas without electricity and running water, the electronic age is still a long way off.

3.3   Advantages of networks

The following have been summarised from Starkey (1997:20):

- Networks facilitate the exchange of information, skills, knowledge, experiences, materials and media.
- Network information exchange and coordination leads to less duplication or work and effort.
- Networks can effectively link people of different levels, disciplines, organisations and backgrounds who would not otherwise have an opportunity to interact.
- Networks can create an awareness among separated people and organisations that many others have similar concerns and developmental problems.
- Networks can provide the critical mass needed for local, national or international advocacy, action and policy change.
- Networks can help address complex development problems and issues that seem overwhelming to those working at village level.
- Networks can bring together funding and technical cooperation agencies and those in need of resources and support.

3.4   Misinformation

'While networks can disseminate valuable information, some of the information being shared may be of dubious reliability, and some may even be false' (Starkey, 1997:27). A Web site controlled by a central person or committee can go a long way to ensure that misinformation will be kept to a minimum, and to try and dispel some of the urban legends that may arise.

The trick is, once the Web site has been established and the means have been made available for networking, that the facilities are available to enable a follow-up and continued co-ordination of the skills, ideas or needs that are highlighted.

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4.   Outreach programmes on the Internet

There are numerous outreach programmes on the Internet, covering an incredibly wide range of subjects. Many universities and religious institutions run outreach programmes specific to their areas. Most of these programmes are not run for profit, and involve trying to get a community to participate. They often provide information about their niche, and are aimed at something that is very specific, for example, education in a particular field, providing care for disabled children, reaching a specific religious community; or upliftment for a specific neighbourhood. An example of a successful outreach programme is the 'World Kids Voyage', which can be found at www.worldkidsvoyage.org. This is a programme where a solo sailor Erick Blackburn sails to 'outreaching' ports, carrying a cargo of school supplies and letters, which have been donated for school children in developing nations. It is an 'Educational Outreach Program bringing world's children closer together'. The voyage so far has been from Vancouver, Canada to Central America.

4.1   Child abuse

Henderson (1995:8), quoting Boyden, makes a strong case for an increase in preventative

action and community outreach:

'This implies a far greater role than at present for government and municipal authorities and for community and voluntary groups. It also implies a far more direct involvement in planning, management and implementation'. There are many Web sites dedicated to fighting child abuse, from government organisations (www.calib.com/nccanch/index.htm) to private organisations (www.yesican.org). For example, http://idealist.com/wounded_healer/ is a site that provides various forums for professionals, people recovering from abuse and people who are currently being abused. It also provides a facility to join via e-mail and to receive a regular newsletter.

4.2   Internet can help, but what about the harm?

As much as the Internet can bring together like-minded individuals to help prevent child abuse, it can also bring together the perpetrators of child abuse. The Internet is used to provide support to those that care for children, for those who have been abused and for those who wish to commit abuse. 'The IRC's Undernet provides pedophiles a safe bastion, where the trading of child pornography is socially acceptable. 1500 meet daily' (Pedowatch, 1999:Online). 'Anonymous' contact aids pedophiles to find each other on the Internet, provide support to each other (and therefore possibly provide encouragement) and to swap stories and pictures.

5.   SASPCAN

5.1   Background

The SASPCAN Web site started off as an information science assignment. Difatlho Monnakgotla was approached for information on child abuse and he mentioned that it would be a good idea for SASPCAN to have a Web site. The assignment then turned into a 'real' project to establish a Web site, with much useful feedback being provided by Mrs Mearns (Lecturer, RAU Information Science Department). Advanced Network Solutions was approached, to see if they would be prepared to host SASPCAN's Web site, which they were. Dr Lorna Jacklin was then contacted to start collecting the needed information.

5.2   About SASPCAN

SASPCAN is a networking organisation for organisations, professionals and concerned community members whose shared aim is to prevent the abuse and neglect of children. SASPCAN provides information and training in this field, and promotes interdisciplinary co-operation in and co-ordination of services to abused children and their families. SASPCAN is not a direct service organisation but its branches have occasionally been able to initiate services where gaps exist, operating the branches until they have reached independence. SASPCAN is linked with the African Network for Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN), and with the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN).

The services that have been established and/or work with SASPCAN are:

- Child abuse clinics
- Childline
- Child and family welfare organisations

- Youth groups
- Activist bodies and community-based organisations working for the rights of women and children
- Health care workers
- Social service workers
- Teachers
- Professionals in the justice system
- Police officers
- Media workers
- Volunteers
- SASPCAN's site can be found on www.saspcan.org.za

5.3 Opportunity presented by the Internet

The Internet provides a global forum in which to collect and share information, giving SASPCAN access to international resources and improving its ability to share information with a wider audience. This is because the Internet surpasses scale and distance constraints.

The Internet already has millions of users, providing an incredibly diverse population with information. Although SASPCAN does not need to access all of the users, their target group already has an established presence on the Internet (academics and professionals have been using it to share and provide information for years).

The Internet provides speed of access and the ability to update and distribute information quickly. There are fairly low barriers of entry. Most universities provide access to the Internet to the academics and students and more and more schools are starting to provide access. There are also places like Internet Café's allowing people that do not have access to PC's to interact as well. This means that one of the audience's for the Web site can be children and young adults, because they have access and know-how to retrieve information.

5.4 Purpose of the Web site

The Web site needs to provide information to a wider audience than SASPCAN is currently reaching. SASPCAN would like to be in contact with other organisations nationally and internationally and to retrieve information from other organisations. 'Most networks have been established mainly to improve information exchange among members, and information sharing is a primary objective' (Starkey, 1997:16).

5.5 Business Objectives

- To make the general public more aware of SASPCAN and the services that are provided
- To provide extensive information on coping and dealing with child abuse
- To provide the necessary contact details to people in need
- To attract and communicate with fellow professionals in the child abuse arena
- To increase awareness of child abuse and its associated problems
- To provide general information on SASPCAN, and what SASPCAN does
- The SASPCAN Voice (SASPCAN's newsletter) can either be published on the Web site and/or can be e-mailed to a selected user group
- The profiles of the organisations that fall within SASPCAN will be provided, along with contact details
- Details on events will be provided, for example conferences and workshops
- It will also be useful to collect and distribute information on other organisations' programmes.

Development objectives

The Web site needs to be updated regularly. There will be a monthly deadline for new information (like articles and manuals) to be provided to the developers. Should smaller bits of information change or become available, such as interesting news and new events, these will be updated at the end of every week.

Quality objectives

It is imperative that the information provided is correct. So, no information will be uploaded without confirmation from a central contact in SASPCAN. This is particularly with regard to information provided on child abuse. Individual organisations will be able to interact directly with the Web developers to change their own details.

To keep the overall look of the Web site, there will be one central person (a Web developer) to provide updates. This person will ensure that a template is used so that the overall image of the site is not violated.

Changes will not be made without prior testing of the overall site. Should an error be found it will be corrected as quickly as possible. Links within the Web site will be tested before and after changes have been made. Links to external sites will be tested once a month when the major information changes are made.

5.6   Target audience

It is important to identify the target audience, as this directly impacts the content of the Web site. The target audience will be:

Caregivers, parents, people working in the child abuse field, people working with children, potential volunteers, people prepared to contribute.

5.7   Implementing the SASPCAN Web site

SASPCAN formed a small task group to co-ordinate the information required for the SASPCAN Web site. The original proposal was an adaptation of the assignment that 'started it all'. It was quickly found that the proposal was actually too thorough, and that the work had to be broken down into smaller sections to make the project more manageable. The first stage has been to provide information on SASPCAN itself, the services that it is associated with, upcoming conferences, and contact details for those that need help. The next stage of the Web site is to provide information on child abuse. There is still a lot of work that will go into deciding exactly what information will be provided. The final stage is the more 'technical work', which is providing a search engine for the site as it grows and to provide a feedback form. SASPCAN currently does not have offices in place, so direct support via the Internet is not feasible yet.

The metaphor of SASPCAN being an umbrella organisation was decided on. This is because SASPCAN coordinates so many services and organisations. The theme has been used on the Web site, with umbrellas on the icons, and one on the home page.

A storyboard was used throughout the process. 'The storyboard is a graphical layout of the individual Web pages and the dominant traversals between them. …. It represents the major components in the system and the interfaces between them, and serves as a conceptual model' (Artz). The storyboard has been very useful to present a high level picture to the end users, allowing them to easily see the potential Web layout.

6. Conclusion

As useful as the Internet is for community outreach programmes, and tying professionals together, it cannot replace current methods. It is however essential for organisations to have a Web presence, allowing them to network both within South Africa, and internationally. The Internet presents the opportunity for global outreach, along with many free services which aid in maintaining and controlling a Web site and mailing lists.

As much as the Internet can bring together those that wish to help, it can also bring together those that wish to harm, and provide them with a support structure. The Internet is however known for self-regulation, as users are known to remove sites that they do not wish to see, for example, through flaming.

There is an abundant amount of information provided on the Internet about child abuse. Web rings are also used to provide links from one member's site to another's. Organisations also tend to provide a links page to others' and to additional useful information, which aids in tying them together. SASPCAN has recently established an Internet presence, which has proved to be very useful, especially in managing to bring the organisations with which it works togethe

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