



# Web Thinking

The Choice Ahead for  
Movement-Leading  
Organizations

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OUR FIELD IS MATURING RAPIDLY.

The next generation of movement leaders is overcoming its fetish with technology and expertise as secrets to online success. Indeed, now faced with existential challenges from a fast shifting landscape, the time has come for us all to rethink our most deeply held tenets in this struggle to remain relevant. Thankfully, a brave few are trying—and they're finding answers. Looking beyond traditional online strategy, they're fundamentally transforming how they and their organizations work—shifting

their entire perspective towards what we call "Web Thinking"—to better reflect the reality of our time. And they're winning. They're charting a path forward for us all.

The teams at EchoDitto and Biro Creative have been tracking and studying this shift for more than six years through their work with a wide range of leading social change organizations. After a decade of obsessive technology consumption, the sector is ready for a new chapter. This manifesto reveals new tenets for success. It is a call to arms for our next generation of leaders.

## How We Got Here

From the mid '90s, when non-profits first got serious about the web, a powerful story emerged among early adopters. The biggest barrier to success, it went, was lack of buy-in from management. Skeptical EDS, VPS and Campaign Managers who didn't "get it" were stifling our movements—holding us back from the great potential of the Internet.

By the early 2000s, this "buy-in" story (both real and imagined) had mostly vanished. Thanks to the mind-bending success of early wired orgs—from MoveOn.org to Howard Dean to Adbusters—our leadership's commitment to the web solidified, becoming largely a matter of degree.

What followed? A period of massive online expenditure. The "buy-in" story caved to a powerful new story about investment. Its simple and seductive premise is that technology is key to growing movements online. (And to a lesser degree, technical staff and outside expertise.) In its basest form, it equates investing online with online success. Does it sound familiar? Funders love this story. Consultants earn their living perpetuating it. There are entire conferences dedicated to this story. For almost a decade it has guided our field.

## Times Have Changed. The New Reality.

The trouble is, as we enter 2010, we find ourselves in dramatically different terrain. And yet despite mounting evidence, few are critically examining the tech investment story or questioning its relevance. This basic tenet of first generation online strategy has remained unchallenged for almost a decade. At least two factors suggest it's time for a rethink:

First, the playing field for technology has leveled dramatically. Even the most humble non-profits now harness social media, mobile and e-advocacy tools—sometimes to massive success. This leveling represents a boon for new players, as barriers to entry fall. And for those early adopters who reaped huge rewards from early investments, it means a loss of monopoly. It's an erosion of competitive advantage. A basic level of infrastructure has been laid for us all.

Second, people no longer depend on organizations to affect change. A frightening idea perhaps, but true. Organizations once provided the sole gateway to politicians, media, movements and power. Now people reach them on their own. They act themselves and also galvanize their peers, especially the millennial generation so accustomed to the web's DIY ethos. The role of organizations is being fundamentally redefined—something online investment simply can't address alone.

## The Way Forward

There is a new breed of organization that seems to more consistently and dramatically win online, while the rest seem to stumble around in the darkness. They make up a fraction of the non-profit world but can claim a disproportionate stake of success—generating funds, growing memberships and winning legislative change online.

You likely have your own list of heroes that fits this category. Recent, high-profile examples include the likes of Obama, 350 and Basta Dobbs.

These organizations and their ilk are a source of great promise. And indeed, our research over the past six years suggests that their most significant, defining variable goes beyond what is traditionally understood as online strategy—beyond technology and technical expertise. Rather, their success is tied most strongly to a willingness to break from the status quo, to make brave moves to fundamentally transform how they and their organizations work—their very perspective—to better reflect the reality of our time. We call it "Web Thinking."

What follows are ten proclamations for the next generation of movement leaders—it is a summary of our findings and a manifesto for our space. It's an unfinished guide and an invitation. It's also a challenge.

# 10 Proclamations

## 1 We Will Position Ourselves as Movement Leaders

We will be more concerned with our cause, our broader mission in the world than with building a brand or institution. And we will reflect this reality in all of our work. We seek to work across traditional boundaries of race, class, gender identification and religion to build alliances that truly represent the people impacted by our issues. We can't be afraid to talk about other efforts in our space, to link generously and be genuinely proud of the successes of our friends and allies. Their success drives our success and drives the change that makes our existence worthwhile.

## 2 We Will Engage Web Thinkers in Leadership

We will make it mandatory for the people in charge of Internet and digital strategies to be in senior staff meetings—and be sure they serve at the highest level of the organization. Planning a new campaign or initiative without “new media” at the table is as foolish as holding that same meeting without Communications or Membership Directors.

## 3 We Will Engage Everyone in Web Thinking

We will understand the difference between IT and the Internet and ensure all staff share responsibility for leveraging the web in their daily work. Not everyone will understand the latest tools and tricks, but collectively, we will appreciate the web's value and the critical role it plays in the lives of our audiences.

### #2 IN PRACTICE...

“Planned Parenthood is clearly an established non-profit. Our supporter network is massive, we have a nationwide presence, and we're over 90 years old. We're not going to wake up tomorrow as a free-wheeling internet-era organization—nor should we. We have, however, had real success adapting to the online reality—particularly when it comes to meeting the needs of those looking for health information and services. PlannedParenthood.org now gets 1.6M visits per month and we are working to develop new interactive tools to personalize our health information. Our leadership team, including our CEO and COO, really gets it and their support is critical. The organization's commitment to online work is evident in small and big ways—from investing in a new media content department, to giving us a direct line of communication with our leadership team and a role in the in the decision making process. Having a seat at the table—literally—is critical to understanding and coordination between departments, good decision making and, ultimately, our success.”

—ANNE KEENAN, DIRECTOR OF NEW MEDIA,  
PLANNED PARENTHOOD FEDERATION  
OF AMERICA

## 4 We Will Hire Digital Natives

We will embrace millennials because we understand the difference between learning about technology and growing up digital—between speaking Internet as a foreign language and speaking web natively. Internet culture is radically changing the way people engage not only with one another but also with organizations. Transparency, collaboration, and open dialogue. Millennials can show us how to develop these cultural norms and values. We will listen and learn with them.

## 5 We Will Look Outward

We will value the opinions of users, members and volunteers as highly (or more) than we value our own. Developing a deep understanding of our constituents gives us the information we need to establish strong and trusted relationships. We will talk with our constituents, listen, ask for feedback, and find out what matters most to them.

## 6 We Will Let Go of Control

We will try to be open and ego-free, and to give our campaigns away. We will trust our supporters with important work—as important as that performed by staff. We will prioritize building systems that enable our audience to carry out our mission, over building departments for doing that work on our own. We will consider it a sign of success to see our brand or message distributed far and wide in ways we could never anticipate. We will add value by providing frameworks, clear theories of change, and even leadership training and empowerment, rather than detailed recipes. The movement adds value by iterating, improving, and innovating on that framework.

## 7 We Will Tap Our Movements To Get Smarter

We will seek out the collective intelligence of our audience—recognizing it is greater than any number of us sitting around a conference table. By transparently asking for help and ideas when we need them most and by collaborating with partners, we will gain priceless insights and assistance. We will use new tools for facilitating dialogue, enabling the best ideas to rise to the top.

### #5 IN PRACTICE...

"We have almost 100 local volunteer groups across the UK, from the south of England to Scotland and Wales. We spend a huge amount of time listening and responding ... About two years ago we set out to build an online platform for their work. And the very first thing we did was host leaders at our HQ to workshop the idea. Together, they came up with their own list of requirements. They told us what they needed and voted on priorities. We listened, learned and built them the tools they needed. It's been taken up enthusiastically and they manage the platform and all of the content directly. We monitor activity and host trainings and it actually keeps us in the loop about what's happening on the ground and where we need to go next."

—TRACY FRAUZEL, NEW MEDIA DIRECTOR,  
GREENPEACE UK

### #6 IN PRACTICE...

"Our October 24th Day Of Climate Action [the largest such event in the planet's history—CNN] involved just seven core staff; roughly one per continent. Even at the peak of organizing—with over 5,200 events in 181 countries—we had, at most, 30 official people in the field. Volunteers were the leadership. That was the only feasible model. And so *everything* we did as staff was to support, shape and enable their work. We accepted from day one we wouldn't have control over what they did. Honestly, we didn't even know about almost a 1/3 the actions until they actually happened. We just had confidence in the movement—that with a compelling idea to make a difference, inspiration and the right tools, leadership would emerge and do amazing things we could never have done ourselves."

—JON WARNOW, INTERNET DIRECTOR, 350.ORG

## 8 We Will Connect People Directly

We want movements—not foot-soldiers. People respond to people, not to brands or figureheads, which is why we will seek ways to connect people with shared passions, both online and in person. We've seen that great things happen when we get out of the way. We will provide connections, support, leadership, direction and venues, but ultimately look to empower people to build strong relationships that don't depend on us.

## 9 We Will Emulate and Innovate

We will watch intently, study and learn from others in the online space. We will share and track successes and failures. And we will shamelessly incorporate ideas that work. That said, the web is uncharted territory and we will also not be afraid to fail with new ideas. In fact, we will plan to fail. And we will rely on others to tell us where we're off so we can respond. The open source mantra, "release early and often," presents a useful model for organizations prepared to iterate rather than launch fully-baked programs.

## 10 We Will Be Nimble

We will move at the speed of the Internet—and the instantaneous news cycle. We will set up structures that eschew bureaucracy and allow us to move both quickly and strategically. Organizations that are positioned to respond rapidly are rewarded. We will redefine what it means to be proactive on issues. We will create and distribute news directly and we will hijack, adapt, and redirect the traditional news cycle to fit our campaigns and issues.

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<http://echoditto.com/webthinking>

### #8 IN PRACTICE...

"Community of Veterans, our online social network, is built on the premise that our members can do things for each other that we can't do on the same scale. The community gives them a place to connect and support one another in ways only they know how. They're helping each other with VA applications, coordinating local events and activities, and even just checking in to see if everyone is o.k."

—DANIEL ATWOOD, DIRECTOR OF ONLINE STRATEGY, IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS OF AMERICA

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