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**Keyboard Roundtables**

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## Why Can't We Persuade Our Field to Interact Online?

### Rob Jackson, Convening Editor (England)

As *e-Volunteerism* enters its eighth year, it is clear that one of the original aims of the project – to get people in our field to interact more online – hasn't been met. Despite our best efforts, we often struggle to get really dynamic interaction in our Keyboard Roundtables. And few readers make use of the reader response and author exchange features that have the potential to make *e-Volunteerism* a special and more valuable resource to leaders of volunteers.

In this Keyboard Roundtable, we're taking time out to explore why this might be as we explore the whole issue of online interaction by people in the volunteerism field. We'll look at three key areas:

1. The Basics: Why should volunteer managers interact online and how can they do it?
2. Online Interaction: What works and what could we do to move interaction beyond the basics of volunteer management?
3. The Future: Where is all of this leading?

To debate these points, we've pulled together some of our closest friends in the volunteerism world: Jayne Cravens, the world's leading authority on online volunteering; Andy Fryar, fellow Keyboard Roundtable Convening Editor and founder of the OzVPM eGroup; and Kristin Floyd, *e-Volunteerism.com* and *Energizeinc.com*'s Webmaster. I've also broken with tradition and shared some of my thoughts as well, not only as Keyboard Roundtable Convening Editor but also as founder of UKVPMs, the eGroup in the United Kingdom.

Given the topic under discussion, it's not surprising that I encourage readers to seize the opportunity for the online interaction that *e-Volunteerism* provides. Please share your thoughts, ideas and contributions in response to what follows.

## 1. The Basics

### Rob Jackson, Convening Editor (England)

Why should people in our field interact online? What can they get and why should they give? Isn't this all going to replace face-to-face contact?

**Jayne Cravens (Germany)**

Neither the phone nor conference calls have replaced face-to-face meetings. The Internet won't either.

I have to admit that I'm tiring of this "debate" about using technology as part of volunteer management. If volunteer managers are reluctant to explore different ways to connect with people and ideas, perhaps they shouldn't be volunteer managers? Interactive technology is not new anymore; even online volunteering is more than 30 years old. No one has time to learn and use all of the technology now available, of course, and I don't believe all of the tools being talked about are appropriate for every organization. But I have to wonder about managers who are still reluctant to engage in online community activities with their own volunteers or their colleagues.

There are tiny non-profit organizations all over North America, with entirely volunteer staffs, using computer and networking technology to involve volunteers, donors, advocates and the general public in a variety of activities. Using a variety of networking technology, these organizations have a focus on being immediately responsive to volunteers' and other supporters' thoughts, suggestions and criticisms. They also network with one another frequently, online and at on-site conferences, sharing ideas, best practices and challenges. But you will rarely find these folks at traditional volunteer manager conferences, because they aren't served by such.

I'm beginning to suspect that many traditional volunteer managers avoid online communities and the avenues for volunteers to comment about things online out of a fear of giving volunteers a greater voice. And they fear decision-making and interactions becoming more bottom-up and lateral rather than top-down, which could expose managers to criticism or require sharing information they don't wish to.

As for why people from our field should interact online, you might as well ask why people from our field should interact "at all." To me, they are the same question. And the reality is that we cannot have lunch or go to the workshop of every person we would like to meet as a part of our work.

**Kristin Floyd (USA)**

I'd like to focus on its value for professional development. The Internet gives leaders of volunteers an opportunity to interact with and learn from other leaders any place in the world. Volunteer management is practiced globally and there are many issues that everyone in the profession shares. Through online exchanges, these issues can be aired and ideas can be shared.

With this kind of interaction, professionals are not "replacing" face-to-face contact but "expanding" the arena of people they are conversing with! In addition, it allows the "voice" of volunteer managers to be heard. The profession often complains of not being taken seriously. If they share serious exchange about issues that effect the entire organization, they are increasing the visibility of volunteer management.

Our Keyboard Roundtable is a good example of professional interaction. It is the ability to interact online that has enabled the four of us to "converse" right now. Jayne is in Germany, Andy in Australia, Rob in England and I am in the United States. The chances of us meeting face-to-face were slim, but we can meet online and expand our understanding of this issue.

**Andy Fryar (Australia)**

Hi everyone. Sorry about the delay in my response, but as it was the end of the month, I was madly adding new members to a newsgroup, posting an electronic newsletter and writing an

interactive Web-based electronic hot topic -- quite apt under the circumstances don't you think?!!!

On the issue of 'why' people should interact, I wanted to start by saying that I totally agree with Jayne. This seemingly endless and continual coaxing of volunteer managers to embrace new technologies is getting old. And, quite frankly, if VPMS are not willing to even embrace e-mail, Web sites and online communities, we have a long way to go!

Having said that, the biggest benefit for me in embracing technology has been connection. It still amazes me that I met (*Energize* and *e-Volunteerism* founder) Susan Ellis through the sending of an e-mail in 1999, at a time when volunteerism in Australia was still in its infancy and the rest of the world still seemed a long way away. On a personal level, the many opportunities I have had to travel, train others, write and connect with leaders in our field has been directly through having access to these new technologies. On a broader scale, I truly believe that volunteering in Australia has developed largely due to the world becoming smaller through the greater availability of online access.

While the Internet will never completely replace face-to-face contact, if used well it does still allow a level of trust and cooperation to be developed between colleagues on opposite sides of the country or globe. Again, on a personal level, I find these days that many of my closest friends, and certainly those I communicate with the most, live on the other side of the world.

#### **Rob Jackson, Convening Editor (England)**

When I started in volunteer management 13 years ago, had a computer but no e-mail and Internet access. This meant two things: I got lots more work done then than I do now; and I had access to significantly fewer resources and means for combating the somewhat clichéd isolation that many volunteer managers experience.

E-mail and the Internet changed all that. Suddenly, I had volunteer management books, manuals, template forms, etc. available to me (many for free) that I could just download onto my PC without the need to re-invent the wheel. I got swamped with e-mails that seemed more urgent and frequent than phone calls and voice mail and so took up more of my time. I joined CyberVPM, became one of a very small handful of contributors from outside North America, and was connected to not only other volunteer managers (for free!) but new perspectives on volunteerism. I was not alone anymore – to paraphrase the ad for the movie *Alien*, in cyberspace everyone hears you scream (and what volunteer manager hasn't had the need to scream from time to time?)!

As a result of being on CyberVPM, I learnt much but grew frustrated that certain issues just didn't help me (e.g., legal matters on volunteering when US state and federal laws are often very different to UK laws). So, I set up UKVPMs and, since 1999, it has grown to a membership of nearly 800 people. In those eight years, I have never been alone as a volunteer manager, and I have never not had people I could share my successes, failures and frustrations with. And those people aren't always in the UK. Like Andy, I now have many good friends in our field from across the globe.

But, and it is a big but, none of that would have been possible if I had just taken but not given, if I had used the Web and e-mail for support but never given support to others. Volunteerism is about people and it is about reciprocity – people give and people get. If people in our field want to be passive recipients of online interaction, then that's their choice. I think it leaves our field poorer and I think they miss out on a richness of experience and support. So if that's you reading this Keyboard Roundtable, then take a step forward, interact, share your thoughts on what we're writing and see the benefits in your work.

On a slightly different tack, let me end by saying that I share Andy and Jayne's frustration that people in our field are sometimes reluctant to interact online. However, perhaps we need to balance our frustration with an analysis of why the message isn't getting through and perhaps

adopt the approach accordingly. With the turnover in our field, it may simply be that we have to keep re-stating the need to interact online because there are so many new people who may be tech savvy but haven't thought about what they can gain from and contribute to our field in such ways (a bit like the reason why we still endlessly provide Volunteer Recruitment 101 courses). Or it may be that we – the evangelists for such interaction – just aren't selling the benefits to others in terms they can relate to. Or perhaps they *are* interacting online, but they just choose to do so in ways other than those we've established (e.g., UKVPMs, OzVPM, *e-Volunteerism*, etc.) and so are not on our radar.

### **Jayne Cravens (Germany)**

The organizations I'm encountering that are embracing tech tools to support volunteers and share learning don't have "volunteer managers," and don't even call their volunteers by the "V" word. When I've told them about UKVPMs, OzVPM, CYBERVPM, *e-Volunteerism*, etc., it's been a surprise to them. They've never heard of these online communities before. Indeed, they are congregating elsewhere. I would love to get more of these people on the traditional volunteer management online fora because I think they would add oh-so-much to the conversations. But they might also intimidate the heck out of the other members!

### **Kristin Floyd (USA)**

Jayne, earlier on you pointed out that *"There are tiny non-profit organizations all over Northern America, with entirely volunteer staffs, using computer and networking technology to involve volunteers, donors, advocates and the general public in a variety of activities. Using a variety of networking technology, these organizations have a focus on being immediately responsive to volunteers' and other supporters' thoughts, suggestions and criticisms. They also network with one another frequently, online and at onsite conferences, sharing ideas, best practices, and challenges."*

Would you be willing to build on this point? Can you "showcase" an organization which has been particularly successful and describe what they've done to encourage the level of interaction you indicate?

### **Jayne Cravens (Germany)**

The organizations participating in NetSquared (<http://www.netsquared.org/>) are excellent examples of the organizations that use technology to involve and support volunteers and others effectively. I have found many examples via NetSquared of organizations allowing greater participation, voice and responsibility for their volunteers and other supporters, using a mixture of online and onsite means.

The relatively new and small organization Blogger (<http://www.blogger.org/>) allowed members to manipulate its official logo on their own Web sites to show their support of its first-ever conference, and engaged in a variety of online and onsite activities to allow supporters to set the agenda for the conference workshops.

The very well-established and large Greenpeace USA (<http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/>) uses a mixture of online means, phone conferences and house parties to mobilize and support volunteers all over the country to create and engage in their own grassroots organizing around particular issues, and to allow these supporters to provide continuous feedback – feedback that receives an immediate response from the central office.

Save Ocean Beach (SOB), (<http://www.saveoceanbeach.org/>) a very small San Francisco-based group, and the World Food Program, (<http://www.fighthunger.org/>) a very large, international UN agency, are each doing innovative work in communicating with their

volunteers using online means, allowing volunteers to use their organization's Web sites to report progress, receive training and other support, and to engage in various activism activities.

I find out about these organizations and their volunteer involvement at tech conferences and online discussions, rather than volunteer management related conferences and online discussions.

See the appendix at the end of this article announcing an award for individuals and organizations "using the Internet creatively and successfully to engage millions of people in support of worthy causes."

## 2. Online Interaction: Part 1

### **Rob Jackson, Convening Editor (England)**

What are the different means of online interaction people can engage in? E-mail or Web-based online communities, wiki, blog, message board, social networking site, podcasting, Skype etc.? Do any of these seem to promote more interaction than others? Why?

### **Jayne Cravens (Germany)**

First, Skype (<http://www.skype.com>, one of many Internet telephone services) requires users to have the very best hardware and software in order to use it. There are many, many alternative VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocols) platforms out there that don't require such; I prefer iVisit myself. Organizations should know they have choices when it comes to this and any other tech tool. VoIP is a great way to make cheap phone calls or conference calls; beyond that, its use by organizations isn't really innovative (haven't we all been using phones and conference calls for many years now?).

Skype also provides instant messaging, but so does iVisit and every other VoIP platform. But I think that a better choice for instant messaging with volunteers and colleagues is MS Messenger, AOL's platform or Yahoo's instant messaging. I do like instant messaging, and wrote about how volunteer managers could use it effectively to support volunteers back in 2005 (link to <http://www.e-volunteerism.com/quarterly/05apr/05apr-cravens.php>). Instant messaging enhances all of your other communications messages via e-mail, face-to-face, newsletters, etc. but without replacing them.

Second, podcasting isn't necessarily interactive; it's usually an audio file that someone listens to, but can't interact with in any way.

So, sticking to interactive online technology: every tool isn't appropriate for every organization. And just like any tool, whether it's a social networking site or a new mini-van, you have to think strategically about what you want out of it, and what resources you can devote to using it. And some networking tech tools are, indeed, very difficult to figure out and time-intensive to maintain (I'd say most online social marketing sites fall into this category), and may not be worth the investment.

Before using a more advanced networking tech tool, a volunteer manager needs to ask several questions:

- Does the program need to reach the particular demographic on which this tool is

focused?

- Does the tool provide significant resources and better access to new people not already provided through basic online interactive tools, like e-mail and online discussion groups (Web-based or e-mail-based)?
- Have other volunteer managers demonstrated that the tool is worth the time to learn and use regularly?

MySpace (myspace.com) is good for organizations trying to appeal to young people and musicians; Facebook (facebook.com) is good for trying to reach college-aged people and 20-somethings. Sites like ned.com or razoo.com are great for reaching people who are specifically looking for advocacy activities or high-profile community service projects. An organization might encourage its volunteers to list their affiliation with the organization on such social networking sites, as well as on professional networking sites such as LinkedIn. Both actions contribute to raising the profile of the organization. But I think volunteer managers should work with the marketing department in using online social networking sites to create organizational profiles and outreach activities, as such sites require a great deal of time investment to learn and maintain. And the reality is that no organization has time to use them all.

Second Life (secondlife.com) requires an enormous amount of time and commitment to learn and maintain, and I'm not convinced it's worth the very precious and over-booked time of volunteer managers. But if a volunteer manager is interested in such, I would suggest recruiting a volunteer to work with both the volunteer manager and the marketing staff on what the nonprofit's presence should be and what activities might be undertaken. Again, think strategically: what do you really want out of this and what have other nonprofits received from their participation?

In summary: I think, at minimum, volunteer managers should be using e-mail, instant messaging, online communities (whether e-mail-based or Web-based, whether hosted by their own organizations or at someone else's site) and regularly-updated Web pages to communicate with volunteers and each other (including, but not limited to, blogs). I believe the time investment in learning to use and actually using these basic interactive tools has a big, big payoff, in terms of the volunteer manager's professional development and profile within an organization, and in terms of streamlining support for volunteers and making such more interactive. Wait on the more advanced technologies until you are at least making good use of these basic interactive tools and have a skill set that prepares you for even greater, more-intensive online interaction.

[NB - "listserv" is a trademarked software platform, and the company is coming down hard on sites that try to use it to mean any e-mail-based discussion group, which is why we talk about online communities via e-mail or the Web].

### **Kristin Floyd (USA)**

Since my expertise is in Web site development, the online interactions I work with most are message boards and submission of responses to questions/articles. In my work, I've seen two types of message boards with very different levels of success.

One type of message board is really a support board or a question/answer message board. This type is the most successful. People seem to like having a place to share their questions with other knowledgeable sources and then get responses back. People seem less intimidated by this kind of exchange and both the person asking the question and the person answering feel clear in their roles. This message board can also be searched by others who need answers to questions or additional support.

The other type of message board is one that tries to foster serious exchange on key issues. This type is the more difficult to foster, for reasons that are similar to why it's sometimes difficult to generate good discussion in a seminar where people are physically present. The majority of people simply don't want to put themselves on the line. The result is that a few people do all the talking while others listen to their exchange.

When online, some people are more willing to share if they can be anonymous but most people tell me they are just as uncomfortable expressing their thoughts online. They also find it intimidating to know their exchange will be permanently available. Understanding and addressing these concerns is an important part of making the board a success.

I've found the easiest interactions to foster on a site are more "controlled" where everyone feels safe or clear about the outcome. For example, a place on a site where people can submit questions to a key decision maker or an expert in a field seems to do well. Also, people seem more likely to respond to articles where a definitive opinion is expressed and people are then asked to share their viewpoints on the issue.

#### **Andy Fryar (Australia)**

I am happy to defer to Jayne's wonderful summary on this topic rather than repeating what has already been said. Although I would like to add the observation that it does feel hard to 'keep up' with all of the emerging technologies and new programs. I do wonder if that is something that holds back many volunteer managers from truly embracing what is available? Having said that, there is no excuse for not understanding e-mail and the benefits of maintaining a decent Web page.

Do any of these promote more interaction than any others? Well, I'd have to say from my observations that for the most part, we are pretty lousy at using any of them. Kristin made the point about people needing to feel 'safe' or 'clear,' and I tend to agree. I am just not sure how we achieve that state.

#### **Rob Jackson, Convening Editor (England)**

Jayne's post is an incredibly helpful summary of the things that are out there. Like Andy, I don't think there is much I can add but I do agree with his comments about the pace of change and the ability of most volunteer managers to keep up. However, as Jayne helpfully reminds us, this area is a good way for volunteer managers to walk the talk and practice what we preach by designing volunteer roles to work alongside us and help us keep up-to-date with the technology and how it can help us.

Kristin's comments really intrigue me, especially around message boards which are my least favourite form of online interaction. My personal view is that e-mail discussion groups are 'better' than message boards because they deliver content to my inbox, meaning I don't have to go looking for the content online. Amongst other things, this means that I can take the discussions with me on an offline version of Outlook to respond to at my leisure, giving me flexibility and control over my online interactions.

However, I hadn't previously thought about the points Kristin made about people wanting anonymity before stating views in more "serious exchanges" and their potential reluctance to commit to putting such views in a permanent record in the public domain. I'm particularly interested in case this is also why we have a majority of lurkers and relatively few active posters on groups like UKVPMs, OzVPM and CyberVPM. Perhaps rules and guidelines for posting to such e-mail groups need to reflect these anxieties and seek to address them. I do wonder how widespread this issue genuinely is; I suspect it may be for some (many?) a smokescreen to hide behind, giving a good excuse not to share their views.

I'd be interested to see what interactive readers to *e-Volunteerism* feel about this so please

share your views via the online interactive features!

### **Jayne Cravens (Germany)**

I want the choice to subscribe to something via e-mail or via the Web. I think most people do. More and more, I subscribe to online communities via the Web, and use RSS (Really Simple Syndication) via MyYahoo! to let me know when there are new posts. So I'm the opposite of Rob: I prefer Web-based viewing of online community messages, to keep my e-mail inbox less cluttered and overwhelming. For me, it's the Web that gives me the best way *"to respond to at my leisure so giving me flexibility and control over my online interactions."* But, again, it's about choice. It's easy to please both Rob and me!

As for Rob's concern about so many lurkers and so few posters to volunteer management online fora, part of the problem is that there isn't much going on *offline* to reinforce what's going *online*, and vice versa. I doubt in the USA that CyberVPM gets mentioned at most DOVIA meetings, for instance, and DOVIAs rarely post to CyberVPM to talk about upcoming events. I once saw flyers for CyberVPM at a volunteer management conference, but only once. I've never seen flyers for UKVPMs at volunteer management conferences I've attended in the UK. I think such flyers and meeting mentions not only attract new members, but they also reinforce to current members – "Hey, this is a resource that I'm a part of and should use more!"

I think inviting specific people to post is a good way to get more people posting – e-mailing or calling someone and saying, "I would really like for you to post something to UKVPMs this week. Here are some ideas." I also think it's important to e-mail new posters offline, to thank them for posting.

And maybe this is worth noting: while I'm an active poster on many groups, I'm actually "just a lurker" on many others. For those other groups – which don't relate to volunteer management – that's what I feel most comfortable doing. That's who I want to be. As Andy noted, lurkers are still very valuable members of a community, and find the information they encounter very valuable (*Ed. Note: Read more about Lurkers in the next section*).

Finally, regarding Rob's comments about *"reluctance to commit to putting such views in a permanent record in the public domain,"* this is absolutely true. In addition, there are some things that volunteer managers would love to discuss and get advice on, but they don't dare because of confidentiality concerns. Perhaps moderators should invite members to bring up "tough" volunteer management issues directly with the moderator, and have the moderator post the question or request for advice anonymously?

But with all my rah-rah "let's-use-technology" talk, I also want to make something clear: volunteer managers should have the option to say "no" to tech beyond the basics (e-mail, Web pages and online discussion groups). Maybe a profile on MySpace or an avatar on Second Life would create more work than it would really be worth. Maybe updates to volunteers via text messages on their phones would be more annoying than supportive. Tech shouldn't be adopted just for the sake of saying "Look! We're cutting edge!" I can't emphasize enough that tech use by volunteer managers has to be part of a strategy and supported.

### **Andy Fryar (Australia)**

Thanks to Jayne for sharing these resources. My mind is already abuzz with all sorts of new ideas and possibilities (as if I don't have enough other things to think about!).

It seems to me that many organisations and volunteers have, in fact, already embraced new technologies and ways of doing things. For instance, I am aware that staff members with

Greenpeace International in Amsterdam are issued a headset and Skype account the day they start and that is the preferred mode of communication for that agency; the same organisation uses the Internet very effectively as a tool in mobilising the support of others for their various campaigns. Yet so many other organisations (of a similar and much smaller size) still appear to be a mile behind the technological opportunities that are available.

So my question is: Are we seeing a technological divide occurring in volunteerism? Is this getting wider and what are the likely impacts of some agencies not embracing the opportunities available to them?

## 2. Online Interaction: Part 2

### **Rob Jackson, Convening Editor (England)**

What has worked in getting people interacting online and why? How can we engage lurkers?

### **Andy Fryar (Australia)**

For the past five years, I have operated the OzVPM online community and written interactive hot topics on my Web site. For the past seven years, I have been involved in convening these very Keyboard Roundtables. And in spite of all that experience, the art of successfully having people post to these forums remains a complete mystery to me! What does seem to work is when a topic is emotive and where people can chime in with very short and succinct comments. But ask a person to engage in any dialogue where their opinions are 'out there' for the entire world to see, and it is another matter!

I guess, for me, the real question is not how do you get people to engage but what stops them from engaging? Do they not feel the need? No time? Not confident enough? Feelings of intimidation? I really don't have the answer, but can assure readers of this Keyboard Roundtable that over the years we have exhausted just about every idea known to mankind!!!

Having said that, here are two comments I feel are important. Kristin already mentioned the word 'safe' in an earlier post, and I believe that this is a critical element in engaging lurkers. My experiences with OzVPM indicate that the longer a person is a member of the group, the more likely they are to post. If they have met me at a conference or participated in a group activity with other community members, they are even more likely to post. I guess in some ways, it is just like a real community. It takes some time to get to know and understand your surroundings. Who are the neighbours and are they trustworthy?

My second comment: Does it actually matter if we engage the lurkers?

I know from lots of anecdotal evidence from people who do not post that they read the things I/we write and the messages posted to newsgroups and Web sites. I even know that some of these people print off lots of this information and distribute it for information amongst other volunteer managers. So does it matter if they are not contributing *back*? Sure I'd *like them to*, but I guess if they are benefiting that can only be good - yes?

Perhaps the real secret and challenge for those of us who are confident enough to post messages is to continue to ensure that the quality of our posts remains of a high standard.

### **Kristin Floyd (USA)**

I'd like to build on Andy's question, "Does it actually matter if we engage the lurkers?" I think it is a great question and one worth pursuing.

I took a moment to go to Wikipedia and read more about "lurkers." First, I want to assure

everyone that this isn't a phenomenon unique to volunteer managers. Jakob Nielson, a well-known Internet usability expert, provides the following information:

*All large-scale, multi-user communities and online social networks that rely on users to contribute content or build services share one property: **most users don't participate** very much. Often, they simply lurk in the background.*

In contrast, a tiny minority of users usually accounts for a disproportionately large amount of the content and other system activity. This phenomenon of 'participation inequality' was first studied in depth by Will Hill in the early '90s, when he worked down the hall from me at Bell Communications Research (see references below).

User participation often more or less follows a 90-9-1 rule:

- 90% of users are lurkers (read or observe, but don't contribute).
- 9% of users contribute from time to time, but other priorities dominate their time.
- 1% of users participate a lot and account for most contributions; it can seem as if they don't have lives because they often post just minutes after whatever event they're commenting on occurs.

Jakob Nielson goes on to ask the question, "How to Overcome Participation Inequality?" His answer:

*You can't! The first step to dealing with participation inequality is to recognize that it will always be with us. It's existed in every online community and multi-user service that has ever been studied. Your only real choice here is in how you shape the inequality curve's angle.*

Nielson then provides an excellent list of suggestions. You can read his suggestions at: [http://www.useit.com/alertbox/participation\\_inequality.html](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/participation_inequality.html).

A condensed version of his suggestion list includes:

- Make participation a side effect.
- Edit, don't create.
- Reward (but don't over-reward) participants.
- Promote quality contributors.

All of his suggestions speak to his point that we can't expect everyone to have the time or inclination to have full-blown interactions online. Instead, we need to value more those who contribute high-quality responses and then encourage smaller scale contributions from those who aren't contributing. This builds on Andy's point that many people "can chime in with very short and succinct comments."

Furthermore, I personally think we need to remind ourselves that a "lurker" is not always a bad thing. If we use the word "listener" instead of "lurker," we're reminded that these people can value the exchange and share it in other environments. Not all interaction needs to be online; it can start with something online and then build offline.

**Rob Jackson, Convening Editor (England)**

How might we move eGroup topics beyond the basics and onto more advanced issues?

**Andy Fryar (Australia)**

Three years ago, Martin J. Cowling and myself created an online community which is open only to those who have previously attended the Australasian Retreat of Advanced Volunteer Management. The idea behind this was to help the 'alumni' of the retreats, as well as past faculty, to continue the 'top-end' discussions started at the retreat. I've got to say, for the most part, it hasn't worked. It is certainly a great tool for keeping in contact with one another, but it hasn't spawned a lot of high-level discussions.

I think the key to answering this question is that it requires good moderators and people responsible for driving online communities and Web sites, to keep bringing up topical issues, and even making them a little controversial. Sadly, in our sector, there continues to be a huge turnover of staff. As a result, we are all too often dealing with a huge proportion of volunteer managers who have just made their way into the sector and are hungry for the basics.

### 3. The Future

**Rob Jackson, Convening Editor (England)**

Where will technology go in the future and how might this change the nature of online interaction for volunteer managers?

**Andy Fryar (Australia)**

Where it might go I really am not sure. My biggest fear is I won't be able to keep up!

I occasionally remind myself of just how far we have *already* come with technology in such a short time. The things that were mere science fiction when I was growing up (not that long ago) are now a reality. And what is even more frightening is the fact that my young children take them all for granted and think nothing about using technology to their advantage.

For volunteer managers, I believe the biggest change in the future will not necessarily be *what* changes (although I have no doubt much will change); I believe it will be *how* it changes. That is, as younger generations of volunteer managers come up behind those of us currently working in the field, they will be quite adept at and expect to use technology in every sphere of their lives. This, of course, raises the key question of whether or not online interaction between volunteer managers will eventually improve. I suspect, by sheer weight of numbers, that we will eventually see more people comfortable with this medium.

Here's my prediction: In addition to leading flesh-and-blood volunteers, I believe that in the future we will be managing third-dimension virtual volunteers! Technology seems to be continually pushing the boundaries between reality and an alternate universe. For instance, anyone familiar with Second Life ([www.secondlife.com/](http://www.secondlife.com/)) will already be familiar with a 3D virtual world where you can purchase and own property, create your own person and meet others. Already major corporations are paying for advertising space in Second Life-land. I believe it is only a matter of time before some clever person (in Second Life) works out a way to get others (in Second Life) to volunteer. They will, of course, then need to be well managed. Don't laugh - I am serious!!!

**Kristin Floyd (USA)**

As part of answering this question, I would like to back up a minute to look at how we defined

"online interaction" for this discussion. We have narrowly defined "online interaction" to refer to communication between individuals online. That's fine to do for this discussion but I'm uncomfortable leaving the reader thinking of "online interaction" as defined in this limited way. "Online interaction" means something much broader to me. I looked up my trusty Wikipedia and saw "Interaction" defined as "a kind of action that occurs as two or more objects have an effect upon one another."

If we think of online interaction in this broader context – and not just the online communication between individuals – there are all kinds of exciting possibilities for the volunteer manager. I believe this may be where we see the most growth. Although I agree with Jayne's point that a podcast in itself is not interactive, however, the *action* of signing up for a podcast is interactive.

What was initially so exciting about the Web (and now taken for granted) was its interactive hyperlinks – the fact that people could follow their unique path as they browsed materials. I think this kind of personal interactive experience will only get better with increased bandwidths and more efficient programs. This will make it easier for volunteer managers who are online to find what they are looking for; experience audiovisual interaction with online seminars; choose to receive notifications and downloads from providers; insert a comment about a specific exchange; and rate their experience, etc.

Returning to the more specific topic of interaction among individuals online: I wonder if the emphasis on trying to get people involved in e-mail and Web discussions or posting responses to articles is sticking too much to the kind of exchanges that exist in the "physical" world. Maybe, in the virtual world, we need to be "building" rather than "discussing" and "responding." More specifically, I'm wondering if it is time to revisit the original interactive vision we had for our *e-Volunteerism* articles. Eight years ago, we imagined an article page where people could insert comments/questions/annotations at any point in the article rather than "read the article" and then "respond." At the time, it was difficult to pull off. The process became cumbersome and didn't seem worth the effort.

However, times are changing and it is easier to create this kind of online experience. The potential for "building on an article" rather than "responding to an article" is now available. I think this would enable people to respond quicker to smaller sections of an article and feel more a part of the process. Of course, it may still not produce results, but it would certainly be closer to our vision and I hope a more positive experience for everyone.

#### **Jayne Cravens (Germany)**

In this discussion, we've focused primarily on the basic tools: online discussion groups and e-mail. There are, of course, more sophisticated tools out there. But based on discussions in various online discussion groups for volunteer managers and at volunteer manager conferences I've attended, I think most volunteer managers still are not ready to talk about these more complex tools. Many of them still bristle at discussions about online volunteering, a concept that's been in practice now for more than 30 years and has been mainstreamed at thousands of organizations.

I would have thought there would be dozens of people editing the volunteerism-related pages on Wikipedia by now, but it still isn't so.

That said, there *are* people ready to explore more sophisticated tools to involve volunteers and others, and to network with one-another. I encourage them to read [TechSoup](http://www.techsoup.org/) (http://www.techsoup.org/) regularly, and to attend conferences recommended on the TechSoup Web site. That's a great way to network with organizations who are already using Wikis, interactive

blogs, Second Life, online social networking sites and more to interact with volunteers, support them and involve them even further, as well as to network with one another. Tech evangelists are great, but talking to people at nonprofits who are actually *using* these tools effectively is, I think, the best motivator.

Networking technology will continue to become more complicated/sophisticated to use, and it will permeate even more into our everyday lives. Therefore, the competition for people's time and attention is going to get even more fierce. There are two ways for volunteer managers to look at this changing climate: as a sea of chaos, noise, bells and whistles in which they will drown; or as an opportunity to put something more meaningful and more human behind technology, to rise above the flashy tools and actually do something to engage with people around activities and issues we care about.

I predict that volunteer managers – those who love connecting people and ideas; who love giving people opportunities to engage in activities they care about; who see volunteers as absolutely necessary rather than nice; who see volunteers as so much more than "free labor;" and who see volunteers as partners/community investors – are going to embrace opportunities to network online and be successful with networking tech, no matter what that tech happens to be. I don't think the obstacle is lack of tech knowledge; I believe the greatest obstacle is moving beyond the old mindsets of how volunteers should be supported and involved.

#### **Appendix to Jayne Craven's comment in The Basics:**

*Posted on September 30, 2007*

ePhilanthropy Foundation Announces International Awards for 2007

The Washington, D.C.-based ePhilanthropy Foundation has announced the winners of the 2007 International ePhilanthropy Awards.

The awards recognize individuals, organizations, and companies that are using the Internet creatively and successfully to engage millions of people in support of worthy causes. The International Fund for Animal Welfare received the People's Choice Award for its StopTheSealHunt.org Web site and program, which has registered ninety-six thousand online activists and raised more than \$190,000. The award program drew nearly ten thousand votes worldwide - a record.

Other winners include Peace x Peace in Washington, D.C., for its global network that connects individual women and women's circles worldwide through the Internet; the American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia for its Friends for Peace project; Toronto-based Gulu Walk for successfully coordinating thirty thousand people in eighty-two cities and fifteen countries to walk for peace in northern Uganda; and the Netherlands-based Mama Cash for its second annual Campaign 88 Days to educate people about, and attract donor support for, issues affecting women and girls.

"As a fundraising professional for almost forty years, I can say that the advent of the Internet has had an incredible impact on the sights of the individual donor," said EPF board chair Bob Carter. "The ability for not-for-profits of all shapes and sizes to communicate, cast a vision, touch potential donors, tell their stories, and receive contributions is truly global."

This story was located at: <http://foundationcenter.org/pnd/news/story.jhtml?id=190200006>

## Keyboard Roundtable Participants

### Jayne Cravens

Jayne Cravens is an internationally-recognized professional in the management of civil society organizations/nonprofit organizations, specializing in public relations and volunteer management. For five years, she managed the Online Volunteering service ([www.onlinevolunteering.org](http://www.onlinevolunteering.org)), an initiative of United Nations Volunteers and the UN Development Program (UNDP). She also was a manager of the UN Information Technology Service ([www.unites.org](http://www.unites.org)), an initiative to promote and support volunteers applying Information Communications Technologies for Development (ICT4D).

For four years, Jayne directed the Virtual Volunteering Project ([www.serviceleader.org/old/vv/](http://www.serviceleader.org/old/vv/)), helping to pioneer the concept of involving volunteers via the Internet, including documenting the essentials for online mentoring programs. She also worked with the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin regarding its AmeriCorps programs based in elementary schools serving low-income communities, and was a part of the organizing committee for the Texas Governor's Mentoring Initiative.

Her own Web site, [www.coyotecomunications.com](http://www.coyotecomunications.com), provides tips on how mission-based organizations can benefit from computer and Internet technology.

Though she currently lives in Germany, Jayne's permanent contact information is in the US:

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### Kristin Floyd

Kristin Floyd is the Internet Strategist for Energize Inc. and the Webmaster for the Energize and *e-Volunteerism* Websites. She is president of the Website design firm, *Communication First* and provides consulting services to nonprofits and small businesses that are developing or enhancing their own Websites. She has combined her understanding of the complexities of online technology with her nonprofit experience in marketing, fundraising, volunteer outreach, and educational development to help bring Energize and other clients into the "wired world." Her specialty is in creating Websites that foster a sense of community with site visitors. Kristin sees this unique function as a vital element in the success of most nonprofit Web sites. You can visit her Website at <http://communicationfirst.com>.

Prior to her Web work, she was a volunteer coordinator and curriculum developer for the Center for Literacy. In addition, she served as a fundraiser at the Philadelphia office of Sierra Club. She joined Energize Inc. in 1992, initially serving as the Marketing Director.

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**Andy Fryar, Convening Editor, Keyboard Roundtable  
and e-Volunteerism Manuscripts Developer**

Andy Fryar is the founder and Director of OzVPM (*Australasian Volunteer Program Management*) - a consultancy, training and resource company specialising in volunteerism – particularly as it relates to the Australasian region. His Web site is [www.ozvpm.com](http://www.ozvpm.com).

Andy is a past President of Volunteering Australia, the peak national body representing volunteerism in his country, and past Chairperson of Volunteering South Australia, the volunteerism resource centre for his state.

He has travelled extensively, training at conferences or visiting volunteer programs right around Australia, as well as in Canada, India, Singapore, New Zealand, the UK and the United States of America. Andy is a co-founder of the Australasian Retreat for Advanced Volunteer Management and in 2004 he was the first person from the southern hemisphere to be invited to join the faculty of the UK's Institute for Advanced Volunteer Management.

In 1999, he was responsible for convening the working party that evolved into AAVA - the Australasian Association for Volunteer Administrators – Australia's first professional association for volunteer managers.

Andy has been involved in the editorial process for several Australian books on volunteering, and is a co-author of [Volunteer Management: an essential guide \(2nd edition\)](#) – Australia's premier guidebook to volunteering.

He also currently serves on the editorial committee of the *Australian Journal of Volunteering*.

In 2000, Andy was honoured to be invited to join the editorial team of *e-Volunteerism* for which he serves both as a Convening Editor of the Keyboard Roundtable feature section and as Manuscripts Developer. He has been employed as a Volunteer Manager since 1991 and, in addition to the above, continues to be involved in the day-to-day operation of a volunteer program in the city of Adelaide, South Australia, where he is employed as the Executive Officer of the Lyell McEwin Regional Volunteer Association.

In 2003, Andy was awarded a 'Centenary Medal' through the Australian government's honours system, in recognition for his services to Australian volunteering.

Andy can be reached at [andy@ozvpm.com](mailto:andy@ozvpm.com)

**Rob Jackson, Convening Editor, Keyboard Roundtable**

Rob Jackson, Director of Volunteering Development and Grant Making for Volunteering England ([www.volunteering.org.uk](http://www.volunteering.org.uk)), has worked in Volunteering Management since July 1994. During that time he has managed volunteers and volunteer programmes in education, advice, fundraising and children's services settings at local, regional and national levels.

Between 1999 and 2005, Rob led the development of volunteer fundraising at the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB). During this time, Rob chaired the Institute of Fundraising working party that developed the UK's first code of good practice on volunteer fundraising. Rob also spent nine months running the

Fundraising (Strategy) Department at RNIB, with responsibility for volunteering development, fundraising development, training and development, strategy and planning, and business and market development research.

In April 2005, Rob joined Volunteering England as regional volunteering development manager. He had responsibility for a team of nine staff who delivered a 10-year strategy to improve England's volunteering infrastructure. He was promoted to his present position in 2006.

Rob has also previously run his own training company– providing volunteer management training for, amongst others, the Directory of Social Change, Wales Council for Voluntary Action, The Imperial War Museum North, NCH, the Metropolitan Police, Volunteer Bureaux and The Samaritans.

Rob writes, speaks and trains internationally on volunteer programme management and is active in a variety of ways within the UK volunteering sector, including serving as a volunteer governor at his son's school.

Rob also pioneers the use of the Internet as a means of networking amongst managers of volunteers and volunteer programmes in the UK through UKVPMs ([http://groups.yahoo.com/group/UKVP M s](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/UKVP_M_s)), the first e-mail networking resource for UK-based volunteer programme managers.

His e-mail address is [rob.jackson@volunteeringengland.org](mailto:rob.jackson@volunteeringengland.org)

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