Major: Social Media Ecology
Capstone: Charity Mob (www.charitymob.org)
Analytic Statement
Fall 2009

<center>Charity Mob – Why Social Media Matters</center>

<center>"In the midst of a fabulous array of historically unprecedented and utterly mind-
boggling stimuli...whatever."</center>
<center>- Thomas de Zengotita, 2005</center>

In 2006, a Youtuber known as MadV posted a 40 second video encouraging the Youtube

community to make a difference. The process was simple: come up with a message that you

want to tell to the world, write the message on the palm of your hand, and silently share the

message with the Youtube community through a video response. What began as nothing more

than a curious and personal Youtube project, grew into a social movement that awarded MadV

with the most responded to video in Youtube history. In just eight months, video responses from

over 2,200 other Youtube community members shared their statements on the video sharing Web

site. Finally, MadV, who insists on keeping his anonymity by wearing a Guy Fawkes mask,

compiled a number of the video responses together in a video called "The Message." The result

displayed a montage of anonymous and caring faces, holding out their open hands, and offering

words of advice, inspiration, and encouragement.

This instance of humanity on the Internet is just one of the many ways people come together

in collaboration by applying the social power of user-driven environments. However, during the

course of my undergraduate career, I found that this new empowerment of connectivity and

collaboration is very rarely accepted and explored in the classroom. Professors and faculty often

quickly dismiss the potential of the Web 2.0 phenomenon and its capabilities in the classroom

setting, while my fellow classmates rarely understand the power and implications of the new

media environments they interact within on a daily basis. Therefore, I entered into the

Individualized Major Program to foster my increasing interest in the cultural and technological concepts of social media, social networks, and other digital environments. Furthermore, for the culmination of my studies, I challenged myself to plan, design, and implement my own social media environment, CharityMob.org, which would hopefully replicate the sense of humanity and compassion that MadV stumbled upon.

Defining the Terms and Concentration

> "We shape our tools, and thereafter, our tools shape us."
> - Marshall McLuhan, 1964

Since the field I study is a rising and fairly unfamiliar area in business, communications, and academia, it is necessary that I clear up a few terms that I will be using interchangeably throughout this paper. Often, I will use the terms Web 2.0, social media, social networks, new media, and emerging technology to describe the environments and communities that my studies are involved around. These buzzwords simply refer to any community or digital environment that requires user-generated content (content uploaded, shared, and distributed from user-to-user, user-to-group, or user-to-community) and group participatory action to continue site operation. Examples of these Internet tools and environments include Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Youtube, Digg, Technorati, Second Life, among many others. While in the industry these terms and buzzwords do not necessarily share the same definition, for the purposes of this paper, it causes no harm to apply these terms more flexibly.

Furthermore, before I delve more into the process of my final project and how it ties into my IMP curriculum, it is important that I briefly describe my IMP concentration, especially since my area of study has slightly altered since I began my time as an IMP student. Throughout my Individualized Major coursework, my studies evolved from the technical to the business to the cultural aspects of emerging online technology; however, at no time in the process did I ever stop

asking questions about online trends or virtual tools and environments. Ultimately, toward the middle of my IMP career path, I realized what I have always been studying, no matter the perspective I take, is virtual conversation within mediated environments.

Thus, Social Media Ecology, my individually defined major, is the study of new media and emerging technology as environments, specifically focusing on how the conversations and interactions within those mediated environments impact human life and affairs. In other words, rather than just looking at new media as a tool or a means to communicate information, media ecologists look at how these environments are shaping the culture and conversation around us. Throughout my program, my coursework has become very rounded in all aspects of the media field. For example, I have taken courses in not only the design and production of traditional and new media, but also have examined the analytic questioning and researching of media theory and business fundamentals.

The Project

> "When we change the way we communicate, we change society."
> - Clay Shirky, 2005

In 1961, when Newton Minnow invited the National Association of Broadcasters to sit down in front of the television set for an entire broadcast day, he promised them that they would view nothing but a vast wasteland. Later, in 1984, when Neil Postman observed the current state of television content and the passive television audience, he contended that we were a "do nothing" society that had no will to solve social and global crises. Following suit, in 2006, Times reporter Lev Grossman commented, "Some of the comments on YouTube make you weep for the future of humanity just for the spelling alone, never mind the obscenity and the naked hatred." The truth is that all of these critics make very credible observations about the media of our everyday lives. We are living in a media landscape where it is admittedly easy to fall victim to distraction,

apathy, and disengagement. In fact, while writing this paper, I cannot count the number of times I have checked my email, Facebook, or cell phone. Perhaps, even a reader of this paper will find it hard to turn off this ever-present connection to technology and its networks, and as a result, will be pulled away from the contents of my essay. However, with my IMP capstone project, I have attempted to illustrate the other side to this argument, and refuse to accept "the public has adjusted to indifference, incoherence, and to be amused" (Postman, 1984). Today, rather than believing Postman's argument that we are on the verge of amusing ourselves to death, I believe we have the potential to be on the verge of a social movement forward, significantly impacted by the conversations and bonds we form online.

For my Individualized Major Capstone, I developed a user-driven social fundraising Website called Charity Mob (found at www.charitymob.org). The goal of Charity Mob is to provide a social platform that allows individuals to connect, canvas, and raise funds for good-willed community projects and charities. The inspiration for the project emanates from a growing belief that the communities forming online have passion and humanity, and further, by working together, the individuals in these communities can make a real difference to the people and environments around them and beyond. Ultimately, Charity Mob is my attempt to use social media and the concept of online community to change the conversation in today's mediascape. (See appendices for more detailed information on Charity Mob)

I am proud to say that I do believe the Charity Mob project stands as the most fitting capstone for my Individualized Major. Not only did it offer me more experiences and challenges in the social media field than a research paper or internship could have provided, but also my Website uniquely incorporated most of the key Web 2.0 themes that I found during my individualized readings and research in my IMP-I 460 coursework. Specifically, my time building a business

plan and learning the fundamentals of social media with Richard Schrimper, Professor of Accounting in the Kelley School of Business and Founder of CultureU.com (social network for young artists and musicians), gave me the confidence to not only plan Charity Mob, but also implement it. During my semester with Professor Schrimper, I read *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* by Clay Shirky, *The Future of the Internet - And How to Stop It* by Jonathan Zittrain, and kept up-to-date with multiple blogs covering the social media industry.

The research led to a comprehensive understanding of social media. So, why does social media matter and why can it change our current media landscape? Furthermore, what makes Charity Mob fit into this category of social media? I have found the following themes to be consistent throughout many successful online communities:

1) **Controlled by the Users** – Users generate, share, and disseminate the content (text, images, videos, etc). All of the causes on Charity Mob are submitted by the users of the Charity Mob Website. The only filter on the site operates by users burying, or reporting, causes that they find unworthy, unrelated, or ill intended.

2) **Two-way conversation** – The conversation needs to be reciprocal, thus, not one-way like a television broadcast may seem. Charity Mob invites users to discuss the causes they are passionate about through commenting, canvassing, and even, privately messaging users and groups.

3) **Creation of Networks** – Networking and the forming of collaborative communities willing to work together and help each other out is a necessity. These networks serve as virtual bonds and partnerships, and these interpersonal relationships keep people from

feeling alone and anonymous. Charity Mob forms networks and individual bonds (friends) around causes that people are mutually passionate about.

4) **Transform individual pursuits into collective action** – Communities need people collaborating to reach collective goals and achievements. Although Charity Mob provides a competitive structure pitting causes against one another, ultimately, users are working to spread awareness and funds to good-willed community charities and causes.

5) **Make Group Formation / Identity easy** – People need to be united together in smaller categories within the larger community network. Often times, sites link people by interests, hobbies, likes, dislikes, etc. While Charity Mob has yet to incorporate smaller group formation among members, Charity Mob has the Mob identity. The Mob is the collective identity of site members wanting to cause social change in their communities and beyond. In the future, Charity Mob could easily incorporate smaller groups, allowing members to join niche concentrations that advocate areas such as animal rights; health awareness, prevention, and cures; human rights; environment concerns; etc.

Without a clear understanding of these fundamental principles in social media, I could have never undertaken the process of creating the Charity Mob project. Luckily, I had a number of professors, mentors, and online heroes to advise and inspire me along the way.

The Process

> "It's education that's meant to take us into this future we can't grasp. If you think of it, children starting school this year will be retiring in 2065... Nobody has a clue, despite all the expertise, what the world will look like in five years time, and yet we are meant to be educating them [children and students] for it."
>
> <div align="right">- Sir Ken Robinson, 2006, TED Lecture</div>

The Charity Mob project can be separated into three distinct phases of production: the planning period, the design period, and the implementation period. Interestingly, each period of

time required me to draw on very separate paths that Professor Thom Gillespie and I interwove into my IMP curriculum. As stated before, to have a well-rounded foundation in virtual environments, Professor Gillespie and I thought it was never right to limit the areas that I would explore, so long as they touched the social media industry in some way. Therefore, my background comes from coursework, individualized seminars, and work experiences that versed me in the technical, cultural, sociological, and business components intricately found in social media careers.

The Plan

The earliest planning for my capstone project started late Fall of 2007. I remember sitting with my roommate, brainstorming possible ways of how I could utilize the power of social media to do good in the Bloomington community. Eventually, barrowing from one of my favorite Web 2.0 sites, Digg.com, I developed the concept functionality of Charity Mob (originally, My Two Cents). Interestingly, while Charity Mob is a completely original fundraising concept, the ideas and operations behind the Web site come from a number of inspirations that I retained from my IMP coursework and past work experience.

For instance, I remember picking up one of the initial tenets of Charity Mob from the inspiration I found in the Howard Dean 2004 campaign story. In 2004, Howard Dean's campaign advisor, Joe Trippi, devised a run for the White House by running a completely grassroots, social campaign. Although, Dean lost the race, the method in which Trippi employed new media to rally support and raise money (through individual campaign donations mostly under 100 dollars) for the Dean cause was revolutionary. I was lucky to learn about the Dean campaign during my first semester at IU in Professor Gillespie's Citizen Media for Social Change course. Not only did the success of the Dean campaign inspire me to further study emerging technology in the

IMP, but it also taught me how to create a small donation groundswell that I later applied to my IMP capstone.

The Design

Charity Mob was jointly designed and programmed by a communications design major from Pratt Institute and myself. This process was perhaps the most difficult for me to complete as I mostly lack the talents of an artistic eye as well as any advanced programming competence. However, with the integration of just enough technical courses in Web design and computer programming, I had the confidence to delve into the design process.

Courses in Web design, specifically telecommunications courses focusing on interactive media design, provided me with the knowledge to create Web sites simply and intuitive for users. Considerations such as color, navigation, size, and layout all matter to the users experience. Additionally, the greatest tool that I learned from my Web design courses was usability testing. Simply, usability testing is the process of evaluating user experiences by watching them navigate a Web page, and then, make conclusions on how easy the user interface (the site design) is to use. Thus, before launching Charity Mob, I was able to run tests on 5 friends (the recommended number of participants) to see how efficient, memorable, learnable, and satisfying Charity Mob was for both members and visitors. After testing, I could focus in on the strengths and weaknesses of my Web site, and then make changes to Charity Mob's vulnerabilities.

Coinciding with following proper Web design standards, the backend of Web programming, meaning database design and site functionality PHP coding, was another primary challenge I had to overcome. While my designer had adequate experience with these more technical and specialized issues, I was still responsible for communicating my ideas about site operation in a

way that was clear to him as a programmer. For example, I had to be familiar with programmer terminology as well as knowing the operational limits of specific programming languages. Therefore, my introductory courses in the computer science department greatly prepared me for this task.

I am proud to say that my Web programmer and I managed to sit down with each other over the course of three nights to analyze the limits of our open source software, with little miscommunication and misunderstanding between the two of us. By the end of night three, Charity Mob behaved and appeared much like it does today. Additionally, with my fundamental knowledge of HTML, CSS, and PHP Web and programming languages picked up in my computer courses, I have been able to independently add, create, and debug original programs. As an example, throughout the past semester, I introduced a points system and a private messaging system to the Charity Mob Web site.

The Implementation

Implementing my project was probably the easiest and most rewarding of experiences. Once the site design and functionality was satisfactory, all that was left to do was launch and see if the idea worked. Fortunately, my internship experience with GameZombie.tv (a video game video journalism Web site) aided me significantly in this process. While my primary role as a video editor in the internship had little to do with my Web 2.0 business, having the opportunity to work for a freshly organized Web 2.0 student-run organization gave me key insights into the challenges I faced when starting Charity Mob. Primarily, the internship introduced me on how to market my Web site along with myself on the Internet. At GameZombie.tv, Creative Director Spencer Striker was constantly using social networks to virally market the teams' video game

reviews. Furthermore, he relentlessly promoted the site's successes and the team's talent to introduce credibility to the organization.

Needless to say, I followed in Spencer's footsteps when attempting to gain traction for Charity Mob. As an organization that fundraises for causes, credibility was extremely important. Consequently, I stayed completely transparent to my members using not only Charity Mob as an open forum, but also Facebook and Twitter to share the mission and successes of the organization. Additionally, I took to those networks to further get people involved in the Charity Mob community by asking them to join a fan page and answer Charity Mob's question of the week. Here I could continue to encourage members to get involved in the site and keep them updated on what was happening at Charity Mob this week. Even more, questions of the week provided for a unique interaction between my members and me. Questions ranged from serious cause-related queries ("What are you passionate about?") to silly, topical questions ("What are you dressing up as for Halloween?").

The Aftermath

> "Web 2.0 is linking people… people sharing, trading, collaborating. We are going to need to rethink a few things."
>
> – Michael Wesch, 2007

In just one month, Charity Mob raised a total of 160 dollars for two charitable causes. An organization called Bear Hugs, which sends dental and health supplies along with Teddy Bears to children living in poverty both locally and abroad, and Bloomington's own children's museum, Wonderlab, won our first and second fundraising rounds, respectively. More impressive, however, Charity Mob has over 260 members that have shared, discussed, and brought attention to over 50 separate organizations. The causes shared on the site have been local, national, and international missions in areas involving animal rights, human rights, health,

global poverty, social entrepreneurship and so much more. Last, all of this has been done without a marketing push other than a modest word of mouth movement.

After the site launch, I now can honestly say that I know many of the struggles that face social media start-ups. Community building comes first and is extremely hard to accomplish. Today's media landscape makes it hard to keep audience attention, so new ideas need to be novel, easy to use, and fun. Second, while it has not really been a part of my most current goals, designing a creative and successful revenue model for social media start-ups is a very challenging task. For example, Digg.com, the site I modeled Charity Mob's functionality after, took five years to build a community of passionate users and is just now beginning to look for a revenue model. To me, this is a very intriguing and paradoxical way for businesses to work, but admittedly, Charity Mob would have to follow a similar path because passionate, happy users come with successful online communities.

Academically, the step-by-step process of designing a social media start-up gave me the opportunity to incorporate both the technical and the theoretical coursework that professors and I designed into my IMP curriculum. Bringing together knowledge from a wide range of Indiana University departments including telecommunications, computer science, informatics, and business, Charity Mob challenged everything from my managerial skills in organization and communication to my technical skills in graphic design and computer programming. More importantly, however, Charity Mob lends itself to be a constant work in progress, consistently improving as I gain more experience in the social media area. Therefore, if I continue my academic career in graduate school, Charity Mob could transition from an IMP capstone project to a graduate university master's thesis. Likewise, the hands-on experience and start-up obstacles I encountered when designing and implementing my project provide me with invaluable and

very unique professional experiences that other students will not encounter during their undergraduate terms.

The Final Thought

"Why do we blog? We blog to exist, therefore we are... idiots."

- Bitsie Tulloch as Dylan, *Quarterlife*, 2007

Throughout my college career, I have witnessed the Internet impact everything from authenticity to traditional media standards to micro financing. I have asked countless questions during my IMP studies: Why could a lonely teenage girl talking about boys and family capture the attention of millions on Youtube? Why could the members of Twitter force CNN and other news outlets to start reporting on the protests and censorship in Iran during the 2009 Iranian elections? How did Facebook grow from 12 million active users when I started college to over 300 million by the time I graduate? How could a non-profit, micro-financing organization begin to lend millions of dollars by the collaborative efforts of individuals? What does it mean if the average student reads 8 books over the course of a semester, but 2,300 Web pages and 1,281 Facebook profiles? So what is the big deal if a program made for the Internet won an Emmy? Fortunately, I have had the IMP and some great professors help me explore these Internet phenomena over the past couple of years. Change is obviously happening, but what kind of change is it? Hopefully, Charity Mob has illustrated a little bit of the power and positive change that emerging technology can have on our conversations.

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