

## Using social media for conservation fundraising in Kenya: the case of WildlifeDirect

by LIZ MWAMBUI

In 2004, internationally renowned paleontologist and conservationist Dr. Richard Leakey and others founded WildlifeDirect. The term “WildlifeDirect” refers to the non-profit organization registered in Kenya and the USA, and to the website ([www.wildlifedirect.org](http://www.wildlifedirect.org)), a collection of blogs that enables anybody, anywhere to participate in conservation through online donations. Blogs -an abridgment of the term ‘web log’- are sites, usually maintained by an individual, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, and/or other material such as graphics or video. Some provide commentary or news on a particular subject; others function as personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs (WildlifeDirect Blogger Manual).

The purpose of WildlifeDirect, as outlined in its mission statement, is to provide a voice to frontline conservationists while giving those who care about wildlife the opportunity to follow day-to-day activities on the ground, provide support to initiatives of their choice, and read about the actual results that their donations enable. The bloggers on the platform protect wildlife; save wetlands, woodlands and forests; carry out advocacy; help animals in captivity; work with children and communities; tackle poaching. They are vets and doctors, researchers and scientists. The variety of their conservation activities is reflected online.

WildlifeDirect was the focus of my 201 thesis for the Master’s course in Communication for Development (Malmö University, Sweden). It is for me a convincing example of how non-profits can use social media for an essential part of development work – fundraising.

I became involved with WildlifeDirect early on and was responsible for populating a blog we ran for the Kenya Forests Working Group. I still maintain a blog called Saving Paradise on the platform. Having become aware of and very involved with the use of social media professionally, I sought to explore its benefits and challenges as experienced by conservation practitioners using these blogs. I wanted answers to several questions: What impact has social media, specifically the blogs, had on fundraising for conservation? Can it be an alternative to traditional sources of funding

or help in diversification of sources of funding, while addressing sustainability of projects after donor assistance has come to an end? What attracts donations – species, language, relationships, transparency, location? To what extent are the blogs affecting policies, publics and mainstream media? What offline communication practices are bloggers engaged in, if any? Is social media replacing traditional media, or are they used together? What are the inherent power positions in peer-to-peer giving? Moreover, I wanted to explore the freedoms and limitations implied in the technology.

My study –limited to Kenya, although WildlifeDirect has blogs from the rest of Africa, Latin America and Asia- found that WildlifeDirect is an innovative platform, which has appropriated a relatively new technology with some success in fundraising and providing a voice for conservationists. But there are challenges with its use related to the technology and its rapidly changing nature, as well as with resources.

## **Background to the study**

### ***The rise of social media***

Social media are defined as the array of digital tools such as instant messaging, text messaging, blogs, videos, and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace that are inexpensive and easy to use, and which enable people to create their own stories, videos, and photos and to manipulate them and share them widely at almost no cost (Kanter 2010). Social media have changed the way we work and communicate. They allow people to create their own content and to share it widely. In an article on her blog ([beth.typepad.com](http://beth.typepad.com)) titled the “Right way to Use Social Media,” Beth Kanter, an expert on this media, suggests this media “will become as ubiquitous to development offices as is the phone, direct mail, and email,” and that “in the next decades, we’ll see rapid adoption of social media for many non-profit purposes, including fundraising”. There is no doubt the use of this media is experiencing explosive growth and new prominence, not only in the lives of individuals but as a tool in democratic processes and social change (Gilmor 2004). Social media have been used for e.g. democratic campaigns in the US (by Obama in the run-up to the presidential election), reporting natural disasters (the earthquake in Haiti and the Southeast Asian tsunami), responding to conflict and democratic crises (the 2008 election crisis in Kenya, the Iran election crisis and the 2007 “Saffron uprising” by monks in Burma) and emergency fundraising (in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti).

### ***Social media in Kenya***

More than 3 million Kenyans are reportedly using the Internet today (internetworldstats.com). This number is expected to increase with improvements in Internet speed and the growth of the mobile web. Alongside this growth has been that of social media. Social networking and entertainment top the list for what Kenyans are doing online according to a 2010 survey on access and usage carried out by market research company Synovate. Moreover, according to Rotich and Goldstein (2008), Kenya has perhaps the richest blogging tradition in sub-Saharan Africa. Blogs gained prominence prior to, during and after the 2007 elections, providing updates on the election and the subsequent crisis. Examples are Mzalendo (The Patriot, part of a website of the same name) on parliamentary accountability; and Kenyan Pundit, a blog by Ory Okolloh of the crowd-sourcing platform Ushahidi ([www.usahidi.com](http://www.usahidi.com)). Other blogs comment on technological developments e.g. iHub Nairobi (<http://www.ihub.co.ke>) – a place to share technological ideas sponsored by Hivos, Google and Nokia among others.

### ***Why conservation fundraising***

Kenya has a natural resource-based economy, and its people depend on the environment for basic needs. Conservation of resources, and the funding required to carry it out, are a key concern for the government, NGOs and communities. Alongside poaching, severe climatic conditions, and a reduction of the conservation area, limited funding for conservation contributes to declines in wildlife and habitats. Although wildlife-driven tourism generates a lot of money for the Kenyan economy, little is ploughed back into conservation. According to Ruhui (2004), this is because there are huge demands for resources for various sectors in developing countries and resources are distributed according to the perceived importance of a sector. Therefore, areas such as health and water, education and security get the bigger share, and conservation and research are given less priority.

Typically, conservation NGOs raise funds from international donors and generate funds through membership fees, legacies, special events and income-generating activities such as the sale of eco-apparel. There have also been attempts at online fundraising. WildlifeDirect has collaborated with organizations to help boost conservation funds by providing a platform through which people can support conservation.

### ***Studying WildlifeDirect Theoretical and methodological framework***

My study was grounded on the critical theory approach. The question was how the use of social media (the blogs) has been advantageous to its users, with an eye to its disadvantages and the way the environment shapes its use.

In his seminal work “Internet and Society”, Fuchs (2008) notes that the research field of Information and Communication Technologies and Society (ICT&S) deals with two interconnected aspects –society and technology. Fuchs posits that the relation between the two is inherently dynamic; they are mutually connected and have constructive effects on each other. On the one hand, ICTs are embedded into social systems and society overall, and social forces and relations shape them. On the other hand, ICTs enable and constrain human social action. For Fuchs (ibid), this relationship is an endless dynamical evolving loop. Therefore, in order to assess the role of ICTs in society, theorists like Fuchs propose a critical approach that contends that it is unlikely that technology only has advantages (Fuchs & Obrist, 2009).

In a study of research methods for new media, Holmes (2005) observed that qualitative or interpretive studies are prominent, although quantitative approaches such as online surveys are represented also. Many of the current and proposed investigations are constructed as case studies. Methodologically, for my study of WildlifeDirect I adopted a case study, multi-method approach.

To put the study in context, I carried out a review of archival information and conducted interviews with practitioners and NGOs within the sector, which took place in Nairobi in April 2010. I supplemented the interviews with archival information, and mined websites and blogs that write/follow ICT developments for information. Extensive internet searches were conducted for existing research on the use of social media for fundraising.

I used participant observation, in-depth interviews, content analysis, field notes, and an online survey. I used my position as a blogger to undertake participant observation. I asked for permission to conduct the study and requested interviews from WildlifeDirect and number of bloggers. Content analysis was a continuous part of my research process (Tacchi et al, 2003). I analyzed the WildlifeDirect website, blogs, and the bloggers’ own organizational websites to supplement interviews, answer some of the issues that arose, and address my research questions. Purposeful sampling was done to select informati  
on-rich cases to answer these questions (Patton, 1990). An online survey of the WildlifeDirect donors was undertaken to discover donor relationships with the blogs: how they found out about WildlifeDirect, which blogs they supported, what

influenced their giving, and what feedback they expected. The survey was created using Poll Daddy and was publicised on the Facebook page of WildlifeDirect, on the home page of the site and on my blog

## *Findings*

Individuals donating through the blogs have made substantial contributions to the conservation of species. US\$231,000 was paid directly to the field projects (bloggers) in 2009 (WildlifeDirect Annual Report 2009) and \$500,000 in 2008 (<http://wildlifedirect.org/>). Donations are used for a myriad of needs and activities including the purchase of equipment like computers and GPS, food for orphaned animals, patrol vehicles, school fees and bursaries for needy children in communities that border wildlife, field veterinary care, de-snaring exercises and wages for rangers and scouts. A crisis or an important issue, such as e.g. a flooding, gets quick response. Respondents to the survey said they gave based on issues, followed by wildlife species and then personality. Specifically, donations are affected by how time-sensitive an issue is and whether it affects a species or habitat they are particularly interested in, the love of [African] wildlife, dire need, if its people they know, conservation of endangered species and empathy for fellow conservationists/fundraisers. According to comments posted on the Baraza blog (<http://baraza.wildlifedirect.org/>), Tax relief provided by WildlifeDirect's 501c status in the USA encouraged some donors to give.

Some blogs had little success in fundraising, with very low amounts raised. This could be because of infrequency in blogging caused by connectivity issues, particularly in the rural areas, and due to the inability to invest the staff, time and resources needed to keep a good blog going. Some of the bloggers say that this is not their primary mode of fundraising and that they rely on traditional means, like memberships, proposals to varied donors and special events, although online donation is now part of their strategies.

The question of who should pay for conservation is still much debated. Some conservationists believe that those who carry the burden of preserving the world's species should receive help. Others think it is the responsibility of the host countries. In terms of sustainability, conservation without the support of donors seems challenging. But some interviewees foresee government devolved funds, endowment funds for forests and wildlife supported by current laws, corporate organizations and deepened philanthropy among individuals as new sources of funding.

Apart from raising funds for conservation, the blogs also provide a platform for conservationists to tell their daily stories. **According to web statistics provided by**

**the site**, WildlifeDirect's audience is comprised primarily of college educated people aged 35–65, located mostly in Northern America and Northern Europe.

WildlifeDirect has over 70,000 unique visitors per month.

Blogs are used for advocacy, such as e.g. the high profile campaign to save wildlife and other animals from poisoning by the agricultural pesticide “Furadan”, also known as “Carbofuran”, which even caused at least one human fatality

(<http://stopwildlifepoisoning.wildlifedirect.org/>), to create awareness on the illegal bushmeat trade (<http://bushmeateastafrica.wildlifedirect.org/>) and to protest against unsuitable development in wildlife areas (<http://arochakenya.wildlifedirect.org/>).

The website also has a news area through which journalists can access news, video, podcasts, and photographs. Whereas some bloggers have had good success with mainstream media, others have not. Other successes have come from offline engagement with media houses. The blogs however fulfil the alternative journalism role of providing news previously channelled via newsletters and NGO reports. The impacts of efforts and of the donations people make are more clearly visible than in occasional publications from NGOs.

Individual donors give based on faith, trusting the fact that the money will be put to good use. There seems to be no obligation to meet strict rules and guidelines found in the traditional funding structures, apart from a desire to see that money is used for the purpose stated.

Internet connectivity still poses a challenge to some bloggers, leading to infrequent log-ins and posting. Uploading media such as video is difficult. Blogging and fundraising require considerable investment in staff, funds and time in order to make them profitable. There are tens of thousands of blogs in cyberspace and it is hard to be noticed. Links to other sites and social networks, and technology events like PopTech and TedX (Nairobi), helped in popularizing the website/blogs.

Until April 2010, WildlifeDirect received funds on behalf of bloggers and paid to the bloggers without charging an administration fee. At that point, **constrained by limitations in funds to support administrative work, it stopped receiving funds on behalf of bloggers, who were asked to receive funds directly and to provide details about their payment options on their respective blogs.** This was a challenge. According to comments made on the Baraza blog, Paypal, used by WildlifeDirect and one of the most common methods for making online transactions due to its easy setup and the small percentage it charges, is very restrictive in African countries, as one cannot receive cash sent to African addresses. WildlifeDirect was

using its address in the USA to overcome this restriction. Some bloggers such as Lion Guardians found alternatives by using partners in allowable countries. Others have not re-established a donation link.

## **Conclusions**

### ***The case for optimism***

The goal of WildlifeDirect has been to provide a voice to conservationists while giving those who care about wildlife the opportunity to follow day-to-day activities on the ground, donate to initiatives and read about results. The total amount of funds raised by the site since it started has been substantial. The initiative has supported individual bloggers, and responded to crisis.

Judging by the donations received and the responses from the online survey, WildlifeDirect has become a trusted intermediary for people looking to support conservation.

The platform has also provided a voice for the conservationists and local content from the field. There are not many environment blogs in Kenya, and WildlifeDirect was the first conservation organization to bring such a varied group together. The importance of voice cannot be overstated: “in the public face of African conservation (on websites and in film), there is a telling absence of African wildlife professionals who are personally at work in saving wildlife” (Garland quoted in Scholfield et al, 2009).

The platform plays an important role in advocacy, connecting with a global network of activists and the media. The most visible form of advocacy has been the campaign against “Furadan” mentioned above. The campaign was successful, and FMC, the manufacturer, withdrew the pesticide from the East African market. WildlifeDirect is part of a Kenyan government taskforce that is taking very slow but necessary steps towards getting a total ban of the pesticide in Kenya.

Conservation organizations are looking for ways to become sustainable. The idea is to move away from excessive dependency on one source -traditionally, bilateral donors. In recent years, the question of development aid has become the rather large “elephant in the room” (with apologies to this magnificent animal!), and African countries are being encouraged to move away from bilateral aid. Whether countries such as Kenya can wean themselves off donors remains to be seen. Certainly, tapping into online giving can provide other channels of funding.

WildlifeDirect has also demonstrated that organizations from developing countries can create, adopt and shape technologies.

### *The case for pessimism*

Fundraising via Wildlife Direct has costs, including the need for administration, staff and expertise. Most NGOs allocate a portion of their revenues toward operating expenses. In donor-funded proposals, it is an accepted practice to include a certain percentage as an administration fee. Online giving gives the impression that all funds raised go directly to activities, with no fees taken.

Although the platform had overall success in raising funds, some of the individual bloggers report lackluster fundraising results. Some have speculated that this is because they do not blog regularly or do not have charismatic species. Whatever the reason, there is a feeling that the returns are not equal to the effort put in. Furthermore, small organizations simply do not have the staff and time to take on full time blogging. Is there any point for such organizations in using social media?

Connectivity problems are still experienced in rural areas, where conservation areas are typically located. Another shortfall has been the lack of a proper e-transactions mechanism that allows conservationists to receive funds directly.

In “Digital Activism Decoded”, Katharine Brodock (2010) says that economic, social, and political factors determine whether and how people use technology. Similarly, digital technologies often mirror pre-existing divides in economic resources; people of higher economic capabilities are best able to take advantage of them. Brodock quotes the 2009 Digital Activism Survey conducted by DigiActive, which found that activists are likely to be prosperous, especially in developing countries. Thus, there is risk of setting up a two-tier system of information and disempowering people without access. Furthermore, she argues that there is great disparity in people’s ability to use these tools, and that a learning curve still exists.

Writing a good blog that people actually read takes as much time as creating a quality newsletter or direct mail appeal (Philanthropy Action, 2009). One of the bloggers I interviewed said a blog post requires thought and time. Many organizations do not have these capacities.

Another problem is that many crises need attention. One respondent said he was overwhelmed by the number of causes on WildlifeDirect and noted this “almost

encourages me to quit bc (sic) it seems so hopeless.” According to an article on philanthropy.com although giving to environmental causes has increased, people support the ‘more human’ issues, such as *feeding the hungry*.

## ***Emerging issues***

There are other issues worth discussing concerning the use of social media. Perhaps a key one is that there are no “silver bullets” –what worked for one situation might not work in another (Joyce, 2010).

Last but not least, the adoption of a technology brings with it risks. In “Digital Activism Decoded”, Schultz and Jungherr (2010) say we must be aware of these risks. For instance, a group of activists might adopt a digital tool too early or too late. Activists must thus become technologists – managing risk, paying attention to adoption trends, and deciding which opportunities to follow and which to leave behind. In addition, organizations must understand the potential a technology holds before they commit to it. Social media are also rapidly changing: a 2009 Universal McCann surveys says blogging is nascent but social networks are growing. This might suggest that tactics for getting fundraising attention might need to focus on social networks.

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