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In the online world, non-profits are what they do



[editor](#) · 18:34, 26 Jan 2009 · 10827 views · 3 min read



As we start the year of 'social aggregation and syndication' (as 2009 has already been dubbed) Web 2.0 gurus Seth Godin and Brian Solis are talking up how your digital identity defines who you are in the online world.

Godin asserts that two major factors influence the way we perceive people through their online incarnations:

* On the web, people are judged almost entirely by their actions usually by what they write.

* Online interactions are largely expected to be intentional. On purpose. Planned. People assume you did stuff for a reason.

I don't doubt that both those points are true. What they make me wonder though is whether non-profit organizations and international development agencies are taking too long to see that these new accountability rules apply to them too. I am convinced they are.

If you are what you do online, then the option for organizations to just rely on the reputation their logo carries is disappearing fast. Under the new rules, only organizations that are truly impartial, transparent and that provide reliable information about their work will pass the accountability test and that does not apply to many health- and development-focused organizations at present.

The sooner individual organizations recognize this reality, and enter the online space in a genuine and open way, the better. Quick start entry options

include:

- * Introduce some simple and clear organizational policies for staff at all levels participating in online discussions and social networks.
- * Develop guidelines encouraging senior managers in particular to start writing their own blogs.
- * Keep track of what is being said about you by setting up Google Alerts on your organization, on specific technical priorities and high-profile people in your team.
- * Set up a news/RSS feed aggregator that tracks web site content from your closest partner organizations.
- * Find out who in your team has a real interest in Web 2.0. Task them with updating the team on significant new trends/tools in social networking. If nobody fits the bill, ask for independent advice from outside. Now.

Some of the most important players are stalled on the start line. The political realities and bureaucratic control that are central to some international organizations — such as those of many UN agencies — are incompatible with the openness and freedom of the online world. The paralysis resulting from that oil-and-water practicality will, unfortunately, not stop them from being judged by their online actions along with everyone else.

The good news is that this may present a window of opportunity for some smaller organizations and their flexible, forward-looking leaders, who can make the health and development sector's online space their own before the sumos eventually arrive on the scene.

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Original URL: <https://assamtimes.org/article/in-the-online-world-non-profits-are-what-they-do-2516> | Published:
26 January 2009 | © 2026 Assam Times