

## The voice of the Voluntary Arts

# The latest developments in web technology

## Helping voluntary arts groups make the most of them

Since VAN's last briefings on using the web, technology has moved on to include such developments as social networking, blogging, podcasting, content syndication, wikis and social bookmarking. This briefing is designed to guide you through the maze of new web technologies and suggest some practical ways you might like to take advantage of them to help you further the aims of your voluntary arts or crafts group.

The developments listed above seem to have sprung up suddenly over the past few years. Taken together, they are often described as a phenomenon known as Web 2.0. The web of the late 1990s/early 2000s, was best suited to one-way communication (e.g. an individual or organisation communicating to the world through static web pages). Recent developments, in contrast, focus on the interaction between, and among, providers and users – creating communications networks that allow us to work and socialise in ways that were not previously possible.

Tapping into these technologies has a number of benefits. These include, but are not limited to:

- promoting your work to new people, such as enthusiastic web users and (typically, but not always) young people;
- replicating real-world networks online, allowing your members and participants to keep in contact with each other and forge new friendships;

- organising events and planning projects with people spread out over a wide geographical area;
- creating online networks that can help you generate content for your website or publications.

Listed below are a few ways you might consider taking advantage of these opportunities.

### A. Social networking websites

#### What are they?

Social networking websites provide you with a 'profile' page where you can add information about yourself, and link to other people's profiles to create a network of contacts. You can use these sites to discuss issues, plan projects, organise and advertise events, workshops and classes, and meet the people that might be able to work with you and/or take part in your events and activities. Ways of interacting with other people in your network vary from website to website, but often include Internet messaging, public notice boards, chat, blogging and file sharing.

Examples of social networking websites include **MySpace**, **Facebook**, **Bebo** and **LinkedIn**. The differences between them relate to who typically uses them. MySpace, for example, was originally popular with teens and music fans; Facebook was mostly used by students and graduates; and Bebo was popular with younger teenagers. As they have expanded, however, their users have become more diverse and less easy to categorise. This is because these websites are designed to adapt to what their users want from them.



LinkedIn is slightly different from the other websites mentioned above in that it is aimed explicitly at a certain group for a certain purpose; namely for professionals to make and nurture business contacts.

Some organisations, such as Age Concern, have developed their own social networking websites. Unless you have a large budget for software development and marketing, however, this may not be practical. A better solution for those new to this area is to use the existing technologies and establish a presence there. Facebook, MySpace and Bebo have millions of users across the world, a proportion of whom may be interested in you and your art form, and want to know more and to find out how to get involved.

### How can I use them?

The best way to discover the benefits of these sites is to sign up and have a go. As long as you are aware of the security issues and the level information you are providing (see *section F for more details*), then there is no harm in exploring and finding out what all the fuss is about. If you decide you don't like the site, you can always delete your account.

The first step is to register and create a profile for yourself, bearing in mind that the information you provide may be displayed on your profile page. You can then search for friends and/or colleagues who may already be on the site and add them as your 'friends', or invite people who are not already registered to join. You may even find that others have already invited you to be their friend. Once both parties have approved the 'friend request' you will be able, depending on the site and your privacy settings, to see more details about each other and receive notifications when either of you contributes something to the site. Once you have found a few people you know, it is often surprising how quickly your 'friends list' can grow.

On some social networking sites, such as Facebook, you are able to join 'groups' or set up your own group. Groups can be themed around anything, from a particular television programme or type of food, to supporters of an organisation or cause. Group pages contain information about the group,

discussion boards, a list of members and links to related events or other relevant pages. If you run a voluntary arts organisation you could set up a group and invite your members to join.

Once you have set up the group, you might want to:

- initiate discussions about the issues affecting your organisation;
- list your real-world events and send everyone an invitation;
- link to, and promote, your organisation's website;
- encourage people to recommend the group to others, potentially expanding your membership;
- use it to keep in contact with lapsed members;
- find out what other members of the group are interested in and involved in outside of your organisation/activities, helping you tap into the kinds of things they enjoy.

VAN has set up three groups on Facebook:

- **Voluntary Arts Network** – this organisation-led group has been set up for everyone in the voluntary arts sector to come together to network and discuss the issues of the day. If you would like to join, register on Facebook (if you are not already registered), and go to [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6562320932](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6562320932) and click 'join this group'.
- **'I love arts and crafts arts and crafts because...'** – this interest-led group has been set up for amateur artists to share stories about their art/craft form, to explain why they love it and how it has changed their life. To join, go to [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6196736123](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6196736123) and click 'join this group'.
- **Child Protection, Vulnerable Adults and the Arts** – this issue-led group has been set up for people who work with children and/or vulnerable adults. It is a space to post questions, find answers and to share knowledge, resources and information on legislation and good practice in keeping within the law relating to children and vulnerable adults. To join, go to [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6218187658](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6218187658) and click 'join this group'.



## B. Blogging and podcasting

### What are they?

A **blog** is like an online diary, where you can post entries that appear in reverse-chronological order (newest entries at the top). Blogs are mostly created by individuals, about their lives in general, or about a specific aspect such as their work, projects or interests. Some are authored by a team of people, who are usually linked together by the organisation they work for or a project or cause they are involved with. Two of the most popular blogging websites are **Blogger** and **WordPress**.

One of the main attractions of blogging is that your posts can be syndicated (sent automatically to people's computers) to anyone who wants to subscribe (*for more information on syndication, see section C*).

Most blogs allow readers to comment on the posts (and any previous comments), allowing a degree of discussion and feedback that you would not get from simply posting news to a static web page.

A **podcast** is like a blog, but in audio or video format, rather than simply text and images. Like blogs, podcasts are designed to be syndicated, and listened to/watched either on the recipient's PC or synchronised directly onto their personal MP3 player.

Many radio stations now make their shows available as podcasts and many new web-only radio stations have sprung up since podcasting technology has been made available.

### How can I use them?

Blogs and podcasts are great for documenting a journey, so one useful application might be to encourage one or more of your art or craft group's participants to create a blog about their creative journey. They could talk about what they have experienced and learnt and how they feel it has affected them and their outlook on other aspects of their lives. Then using a syndicated feed (*see opposite*), you could include excerpts of the blog on your own website. Having such a personal insight into the advantages of taking part can be a wonderful way of getting others interested, and thinking about how participating in the arts might be a good idea for them.

Alternatively you could use a blog to keep a diary of a particular project, or of the development of your organisation as a whole. Getting people visiting and subscribing to the blog to find out what happens next is a good way of increasing traffic to your site.

## C. Syndication and feeds

### What is it?

The idea of syndication is that you can keep up to date with new developments on other websites or blogs without having to remember to visit them regularly. Content from a website or blog is automatically fed to your feed reader. A feed reader can be a piece of software on your PC, an online service you sign up to or an interactive element integrated into your website.

The latest versions of Microsoft Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox include feed readers, but if you haven't got either of these, it is possible to download feed reader software or use one of the online services, such as **Google Reader** or **Bloglines**. The advantage of using one of the online services is that you can access your feeds from any PC anywhere in the world, and you have the added security advantage of not having to download any (potentially infected) software onto your PC. Depending on the feed reader you are using, you can add a feed by clicking the RSS or Atom button on the website you want to subscribe to, or by copying and pasting the feed address from your browser's address bar directly into the relevant part of the feed reader.

Syndicating other people's content into your website requires some knowledge of website coding and access to the server from which your site operates. It may be worth asking your web developer or someone else you trust to help you set it up. Having syndicated content on your website benefits both you and the website providing the information. For you, it is a good way of adding greater depth to your site and of ensuring that it contains up-to-date information. For the site providing the information, syndication gives them more exposure, generating additional traffic for them.

The two main formats of syndication are RSS (Really Simple Syndication) and Atom.



## How can I use this?

There are three main ways you could use syndication:

- You could subscribe to a number of websites and blogs to help you keep up-to-date with the latest news and developments in your field. So, for example, you could set up a Bloglines account and add feeds from all the websites and blogs you visit on a regular basis (if they support this) to find out about knitting, or dance, or community development, for example. Every time you log in to Bloglines, the latest content will be there waiting for you. Some sites also provide syndication of search results, so you could, for example, go to the BBC News or Google News websites, search for news stories on the topic of your choice and add the resulting syndication feed to your Bloglines account. Whenever there is a new news story relating to your search term(s), it will automatically appear on your Bloglines page.
- You could syndicate one or more of these feeds into your own website so that anyone who is visiting you will be able to see them. So, for example, you could include news from a big international folk arts organisation on your local Morris dancing website – automatically and free of charge. Anyone who clicks on any of the syndicated links will go directly to the providers' website. Although providers of syndicated feeds are generally willing for you to include their content on your site, it is good practice to credit them with their name and web address. If you would like to syndicate feeds into your website, ask your web developer or someone knowledgeable in this area for advice.
- You could syndicate content from your own website or blog to other people. By getting people to subscribe to your participation blog or news feed, for example, you are helping to spread your message far and wide. Most providers of blog services (such as Bloglines or WordPress) include syndication feeds as standard, so that anyone wanting to subscribe to your feed can do so in a couple of clicks. If you want to generate a feed from your own website's news section, speak to your web developer or someone knowledgeable in this area about the best way to do it.

## D. Collaboration (wikis)

### What is it?

The most famous wiki is Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia that anyone can contribute to and edit. You can search the site for the information you want (as with a conventional website); the difference with a wiki is that if you find that something is incorrect or missing, you can simply click 'edit this page' and make the changes yourself, straight away.

Some wikis require you to register before you can make changes to the site. Others allow you to edit without logging in or having to enter any personal information at all. The idea of the wiki is that once a certain number of people begin contributing, the project will moderate itself, and vandalism or poor contributions will be rectified by the other members. As a wiki grows it will begin to develop its own style and standards.

Wikipedia is a wiki about everything, but other wikis have been set up to focus on one particular area or field of knowledge. They are often used in the business world to pool specialist knowledge about complex processes.

There are a number of wiki software providers offering services that cost anything between nothing (free of charge) to hundreds of dollars (most are based in the USA). Some provide a fully hosted service and require no specialist programming knowledge, while others sell you software to adapt and host on your own web server – a much more complicated process. **Wiki Matrix** ([www.wikimatrix.org](http://www.wikimatrix.org)) allows you to compare wiki software to decide which is the best for you.

### How can I use it?

Wikis are great for compiling and consolidating the expertise of a large number of people. This is perfect if, for example, you are researching a topic about which there are no centralised sources of information. Hypothetical examples might include:

- the history of marching bands in the North West of England;
- popular knitting patterns of the twentieth century;
- techniques available to the amateur jeweller.



When working on a collaborative project like this, it is not unusual to form close bonds with your fellow contributors. You could combine a wiki with a social network to help make the most of these connections, and help advance your other projects, activities and events.

## E. Social bookmarking

### What is it?

Social bookmarking is like having your 'favourites' list (which you normally save in your Internet browser) online. Social bookmarking websites include **del.icio.us** and **ma.gnolia**. Once you have set up an account with one of these sites you can begin adding bookmarks to websites you use regularly or find particularly interesting.

There are two advantages to this. One is that you can access your list of bookmarks from any PC anywhere in the world. The other is that you can see who else has the same bookmarks as you, and search through other people's bookmarks that may be of interest. What makes this a lot easier is the concept of tagging. When you store a bookmark you can tag it with any number of keywords, such as 'ceramics', 'pottery', 'Glasgow', 'yellow' or anything else you choose. By searching the site for a particular keyword, you can see all the bookmarks stored with this tag by all of the site's users.

### How might I use it?

There are two main ways you could use social bookmarking:

- You could create your own list of bookmarks relating to your art or craft form or activity and have access to it wherever you are.
- You could devise your own unique tag (e.g. 'hammersmithpainters' – check first that no-one else has tagged items with the tag you wish to use) and ask your colleagues, staff, volunteers, members and participants to tag anything they find that might be relevant to your group with this tag. That way, anyone searching for that particular tag will be able to view the bookmarks relating to your group, art or craft form or activity. It's like a communal signposting project. [del.icio.us](http://del.icio.us) and [ma.gnolia](http://ma.gnolia)

both automatically generate syndication feeds for particular tags, so you could have the results fed to your website.

## F. Security

There has been a lot of media coverage recently about the dangers of identity theft and invasion of privacy associated with these new technologies. By following these basic steps you can greatly reduce the likelihood of anyone gaining inappropriate access to your personal information.

- When you first visit a site, take some time to familiarise yourself with the way it works and how it will use any information you provide. Take a 'tour' of the site if this is available, and read the privacy policy and terms and conditions.
- If you are satisfied that it seems trustworthy, register using the minimum amount of information required. Although this information is usually guaranteed to be kept private, it is better to submit as little personal information as possible while you are unfamiliar with the site and how it works.
- As soon as you have created your account, go to the privacy settings (if available) and make sure they are set to a level of privacy you are comfortable with. Sites like Facebook provide a range of privacy settings relating to different parts of the site and different circumstances.
- A good rule of thumb is that you shouldn't put any information online that you wouldn't want printed about you in a newspaper. If you trust that any other details you put on will remain private or restricted to your pre-approved friends, then you can do so, but at your own risk.
- If a site looks untrustworthy for any reason, don't register your details with it! If you are in doubt about the security of a site you are already a member of, take any sensitive information off immediately and/or request for your account to be deleted.



## Further Resources

VAN briefings:

These are available to download for free from the VAN website at [www.voluntaryarts.org/briefings](http://www.voluntaryarts.org/briefings):

- 71: *Help! I've been invaded – how to deal with computer viruses*
- 73: *Writing for the web*
- 86: *Making your website for everyone*
- 96: *Networking – not just nattering*

Websites mentioned in this briefing:

- **Facebook** – [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)
- **MySpace** – [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)
- **LinkedIn** – [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)
- **Blogger** – [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)
- **WordPress** – [www.wordpress.org](http://www.wordpress.org)
- **Google Reader** – [www.google.com/reader](http://www.google.com/reader)
- **Bloglines** – [www.bloglines.com](http://www.bloglines.com)
- **Wiki Matrix** – [www.wikimatrix.org](http://www.wikimatrix.org)
- **del.icio.us** – <http://del.icio.us>
- **ma.gnolia** – <http://ma.gnolia.com>

Other organisations:

- **ICT Hub** – a partnership of national voluntary and community organisations providing a range of services to help voluntary and community sector organisations benefit from ICT – [www.ictHub.org.uk](http://www.ictHub.org.uk) and [www.ictHubknowledgebase.org.uk](http://www.ictHubknowledgebase.org.uk)
- **AbilityNet** – a national centre of excellence in computing and disability and the only charity providing national pan-disability services in this area – [www.abilitynet.org.uk](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk)
- **Techsoup** – the technology place for non-profits (US) – [www.techsoup.org](http://www.techsoup.org)
- **ICT Consortium NI** – supporting the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland – [www.ictconsortiumni.org](http://www.ictconsortiumni.org)
- **Workwithus.org** – promoting integrated solutions for charities and public sector bodies – [www.workwithus.org](http://www.workwithus.org)

### Disclaimer:

Voluntary Arts Network cannot be held responsible for any information supplied by the websites listed in this briefing, or any circumstances encountered while using these sites.

**Please be careful.**

Information contained here may go out of date and you are therefore advised to check its currency. Updated information may be available on the VAN website: [www.voluntaryarts.org](http://www.voluntaryarts.org)

**Disclaimer:** Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure the information in this document is accurate. However, it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith at the stated date but without accepting liability. We therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking action on any of the matters covered herein.

**Do you need this publication in an alternative format?  
Contact T: 029 20 395 395 E: [info@voluntaryarts.org](mailto:info@voluntaryarts.org)**

### VOLUNTARY ARTS NETWORK



The Voluntary Arts Network, 41 Platurton Gardens, Pontcanna, Cardiff CF11 9HG  
T: 029 20 395 395 E: [info@voluntaryarts.org](mailto:info@voluntaryarts.org) W: [www.voluntaryarts.org](http://www.voluntaryarts.org)

The Voluntary Arts Network is registered in Scotland as Company No. 139147 and Charity No. SC 020345. VAN acknowledges funding from the Arts Councils of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Registered office: 2nd Floor, 54 Manor Place, Edinburgh EH3 7EH.

Printed onto environmentally friendly paper

