

The Art of the

Things are pretty quiet over at the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Facebook page. On the world's largest social media website—where 300 million people worldwide can be found communicating, debating, and donating—the global monetary authority has less than 150 followers.

IMF “fans,” as they are called on Facebook, include people represented by photos of a cigar-smoking monkey, a dog, a fairy, two tattoos, three barrels of oil, and Clarke Gable. Facebook pages for the Asian Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and African Development Bank are all similarly sleepy, or nonexistent.

Hundreds of millions of people worldwide—in

developing countries and wealthy nations alike—use social media websites, such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, to form opinions and get news. Facebook alone is available in 70 languages and boasts that 7 out of 10 of its users live outside the United States.

Despite this global explosion of social media, the world's established development organizations are struggling with the new medium. Monolithic institutions have used social networking for narrow tasks such as internal collaboration, but truly dynamic and creative use of the new media lags far behind that of smaller organizations that have fewer bureaucratic constraints, different organizational cultures, and more outspoken management.

Clay Shirky, internet guru and author of *Here Comes Everybody*, describes the advent of social media as “the largest increase in expressive capability in human history.” During a speech to the World Bank in 2008, he challenged large development institutions to change the way they think and embrace existing social media platforms, which are largely “transaction costs-lowering machines.”

Speak Outs

Among the international financing institutions, the World Bank is leading the

way in mastering social media and the web. Visitors to the World Bank website can link to countless video clips on YouTube—covering wide-ranging development-related subjects, view its picture galleries on Flickr, listen to its podcasts, and read surprisingly frank staff-written blogs on a wide range of issues, including one on the role of information technology development in the delivery of development aid, with contributions from some of the world's foremost experts.

There are only 206 “fans” of the official World Bank Facebook site, but hard-core followers can join the “World Bank Publications” Facebook site, where 3,593 members get together to participate in “Speak Outs”—online conferences in which they exchange in Facebook texts their reaction to recently released official reports and publications, or link to YouTube clips.

One corner of the vast social media universe that lends itself to com-

munications by development organizations is Facebook's Causes. It was launched in May 2007 by a group of young grassroots political activists, computer engineers, and entrepreneurs. Over 240,000 causes have since been created on the site by users on every topic from breast cancer research to stopping genocide to supporting local parks. Of these, almost 3,600 are dedicated to international development and relief.

Facebook Causes has raised almost \$11 million to date and half this amount had been raised in the past 6 months. Considering that the number of people who support these causes is registered at 70 million, this is not such a staggering amount. As Facebook Causes notes in its blog, “Causes rise and fall according to how well leaders keep their communities engaged and mobilized.”

How the world's large development organizations would compete in this kind of marketplace of ideas is an open question. For various reasons, few have risen to the challenge.

In some cases, it is a question of resources and timing. Explains Ann Quon, principal director of ADB's Department

While small, more nimble development organizations exploit

“Tweet”

By Jenny Forster

of External Relations: “Like other international organizations, we recognize the value of social networking sites and are exploring them as another avenue to enhance people’s understanding of development issues. At this time, however, we are focusing our efforts and resources on more targeted options for dissemination of our knowledge products.”

Leveraging the Web

The power of social media does not need to be explained to the small nonprofit development organization called “charity: water.” It has 58,053 members on its Facebook Causes page. It has raised \$80,114 there alone—and another \$10 million in funds in the past 3 years toward 1,300 development projects in 14 countries by leveraging new technology—a complex network of services known as Web 2.0, beefed up with slick marketing, public relations savvy, and a youthful outlook and approach.

The organization is not just into fund-raising. It proclaims that it is using “new technology and the internet to prove the

work they do, connecting donors to projects.” The organization uses Google Earth to track the water wells they build. They are taking transparency to the extreme, using something along the lines of nearly real-time updates to show donors that their money is being spent effectively.

“There appeared to be a growing movement of people disenchanted with charity and had lost faith in it,” says spokesperson Nicky Yates. “We wanted to show them that charities do good work, and you can see that. So, charity: water is centered on transparency. We post GPS [global positioning system] coordinates, photos, and community information on every completed project to show our donors exactly where their donations go.” This approach sounds expensive, yet charity: water says that 100% of donations go to support its projects.

Founded in New York 2006 by a

young American, Scott Harrison, who had worked as a nightclub promoter, the charity’s media campaign started with a high-profile media blitz in the US and the United Kingdom (UK), showing New Yorkers traipsing through the streets with yellow plastic fuel containers and queuing to fill them with murky water from a dirty lake in Central Park. The actress Jennifer Connolly is filmed nonchalantly pouring the dirty water for her children.

As the organization has demonstrated, building up a substantial following on Facebook or Twitter—where it has more than 760,000 followers—is not enough. “Social media is a great tool, but it’s merely that—a tool. It’s one way to reach the people who want to help,” Ms. Yates says.

The United Nations of Beer

The United Nations (UN)—which would appear by its global nature and budgetary constraints to be a perfect candidate for embracing social media—seems as flummoxed by the fast-moving medium as other international organizations. The UN’s official Facebook site came up on page five of 500 pages of listings for “United Nations” during a recent search. It sat alongside “the United Nations of Beer” and “the United Nations of Ninjas.” The official UN page does not have a lot of fans—a mere

7,500 or so—but that’s pretty good since it is simply a home for the organization’s mission statement and links to its home page.

What neither the UN website nor its Facebook page is good at is linking to other sites, including other social media, that highlight aspects of the organization’s multifaceted roles and involvement. One answer could be to tap the 63-office UN Information Centre (UNIC), which fulfill its media and communications role, and which is described as “key to the Organization’s ability to reach the peoples of the world and the ability to share the United Nations story with them in their own languages.” If communication were their business, however, one would expect

a more savvy PR approach to this task, like a link to Twitter, where the organization is in fact featured and has 4,494 followers.

Some UN agencies of the United Nations have discovered the world of social media. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) uses Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and Flickr to expedite and communicate about its work within and outside its network. The UNICEF office in the UK tweets to 3,822 followers about programs and issues. UNICEF is also listed as a Facebook “Cause,” where it has the impressive number of 1.94 million members. It has raised \$76,954 on one site alone—and a total of 131 sites set up by other parties dedicated to raising funds in UNICEF’s name. ●

social media, the Goliaths continue to come up short

