

# effect

FOUNDATIONS IN EUROPE TOGETHER

## FEATURE

### Are foundations switched on to social media?

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# Building an online constituency for democracy and development in Africa

By Christopher Reardon, Communications Specialist, TrustAfrica



Christopher Reardon

TrustAfrica, a young foundation with an ambitious agenda, has embraced social media to forge links and foster dialogue across the continent and among the Diaspora. Along the way it has learned a bit about what these tools can and cannot achieve, but some answers are still proving elusive.

It's tempting to dismiss social networking tools like Facebook and Twitter as yet another overhyped fad. Evangelists tell us these new interactive media can invigorate advocacy campaigns, catalyse social movements and perhaps even change the world. But can they really? And at what cost? Is it wise to develop and sustain a virtual space that might become a distraction from core programme activities or provide a platform for critics and cranks?

We remain mindful of these questions at TrustAfrica, an independent foundation that works to strengthen democratic governance and equitable development throughout the continent. Established in 2006, we represent an approach to philanthropy and development that prioritises African agency and aspires to the highest standards of accountability and transparency. Led by Africans, we run a lean operation with headquarters in Senegal and remote presence in Liberia, South Africa, Zimbabwe and the US.

Over time we have adopted a somewhat aggressive approach to social media, but our first foray in this area was a largely defensive move. Aware of the growing popularity of these tools, we set out to protect our brand by signing up for Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Picasa (Google's photo-streaming site) before someone else registered in our name.

Soon, though, we were hooked. First we added a few flourishes to our online profiles – our web address, our mission statement, our logo, and so on. Then a few staff members signed on as “fans” and “followers,” joined in turn by some of their friends. Still testing the waters, we posted a few items such as job adverts and gained some additional followers. By any measure, it was a modest start.

## Turning point

In July 2009 the turning point came when we ran several Facebook ads on the eve of President Obama's historic visit to Ghana. Not much larger than a postage stamp, the ads featured our logo, a link to our Facebook page, and a brief message: “Led by Africans, we are an independent foundation working to secure the conditions for democracy and development throughout Africa.”

Because Facebook knows so much about its users – from standard demographic information to personal likes and dislikes – it lets advertisers specify the kinds of people who see each ad. Rather than broadcast our message to the entire Facebook community, we created six focused campaigns. Four appealed to residents of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, all major Anglophone countries. Another sought to reach students and graduates of elite American universities, from Harvard and Yale to historically

black colleges like Spelman and Tuskegee. The sixth ad focused on US residents who listed Africa among the things they like. We set a daily budget for each campaign to keep costs under control.



photo © Christopher Reardon

In August 2010, TrustAfrica convened a pan-African jury to evaluate proposals for research on the business environment and investment climate in Africa.

The ads appeared nearly 1.7 million times, and most people ignored them. To our great surprise, though, more than 1,400 people clicked on the link, and most of those became fans of TrustAfrica. By the end of the week, we had spent 258 US dollars and gained 1,142 new fans – a cost of about 23 cents each. We might have done better, perhaps, but as an experiment it was certainly worthwhile.



TrustAfrica provides support to strengthen African voice Conference, in Vienna, Austria in July 2010 (photo © Harri)



photo © Christopher Reardon

Youth leaders assemble in February 2010 for a training session in Liberia, where TrustAfrica is working to strengthen civic engagement and government accountability.

Midway through the campaign, as new fans began following us, we posted a link to an interview with President Obama by one of our grantees, allAfrica.com. The post generated 14 comments, sparking a lively dialogue about governance, colonialism, bureaucracy and private enterprise. We realised that most of our new fans, unlike the subscribers to our electronic newsletter, did not work for foundations, civil society organisations or development agencies. They were Africans from various walks of life who shared an interest in the continent's future. We were connecting with a broad new audience. Because social media are by definition a two-way street, they were also connecting with us. Clearly this is a

key medium for connecting with educated youth and future leaders in a continent where youth constitute more than 70 percent of the population.

### Where we are now

Given the scope of our work, we believe it is crucial to engage with people throughout the continent, with Africans in the Diaspora, and with donors and other partners in the global north. We now have 400 followers on Twitter and well over 1,500 fans on Facebook. We have also posted hundreds of photos of our convenings and funded projects on Picasa and begun adding interviews with grantees, partners, staff and trustees to our YouTube channel. YouTube makes it easy to embed these videos directly in our website and blogs. We are one of the few foundations with a dedicated blog manager, and encourage our staff to blog about their projects and subject areas.

We expanded our use of social media in July this year, when we provided support for a delegation of Africans to attend the 18th International AIDS Conference in Vienna. These envoys – a staff member, a consultant and a dozen civil society advocates – posted frequent updates to our blog, uploaded more than 200 images to our Picasa page, and videotaped interviews for our YouTube channel.

We have also helped incorporate social networking tools into the Africa for Haiti

campaign, a pan-African initiative that aims to raise 20 million US dollars for reconstruction and development following the 12 January earthquake. In addition to hosting the campaign's website, we are working with our partners to use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in related outreach efforts. We are paying close attention to the campaign's project page on GivenGain, an online fundraising tool that integrates social media components, including the ability to stream photos and blog entries from the campaign's delegation to Haiti in August this year.

### Guiding principles

Over the past year, as we have reached out to our growing constituency, we have kept a few principles in mind. First, we try to post often enough to stay on the radar, but not so often that we become a bore or drown out other voices. Secondly, we try to be a conduit for ideas and information, not only posting news of our own achievements but also posing salient questions, passing along job opportunities and sharing thoughtful articles by others. This is especially true with Twitter, where the prevailing ethos is helpful and frowns on self-promotion. At the same time, we try to include links in most of our postings that drive traffic to our website. For the last year, Facebook has consistently been among our top five referring sites – the links people click on to arrive at one of our web pages. It also accounts for some of the growth in our web traffic, which has risen 34 percent over the last year.

The greatest disappointment in our use of social media to date is that we have seen no discernable impact on individual giving. Perhaps social media are not well-suited to fundraising. Or perhaps we are not yet using these tools as well as we could be. These are questions we will be asking ourselves in the months ahead, but this much is certain – cyberspace has become for us a platform for critical debate.

[www.trustafrica.org](http://www.trustafrica.org)



as at global forums like the 18th International AIDS Conference in Ayuk-Takor).