



VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING

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Context

Digital engagement encompasses all forms of active interaction and participation undertaken by individuals through information and communication technologies (ICT). The South Australian Education Department defines it as “providing opportunities for using information and communication technologies (ICT), such as the internet, as means of making connection within and beyond a community.”¹ The blog **digitalengagement.org** is about creating “a collaborative, inclusive online space for those involved in the use of social technology for social benefit. We want to bring policymakers and practitioners together in areas covering digital inclusion, social innovation and e-democracy to shape a new, wider debate and set of ideas and practices.”² The well documented and publicised role of social media in the recent social uprisings in the Middle East is a prominent example of the power of digital engagement³. In the same way that companies can target likely consumers of their products through social media, not-for-profit organisations can target potential stakeholders, volunteers and advocates. Within this sphere, the idea of virtual volunteering has arisen and represents a highly digital level of engagement between a not-for-profit organisation and members of the community.

Virtual volunteering began to receive serious attention at the end of the 1990s, which manifested itself most clearly at the start of the new millennium with the publication of *The Virtual Volunteer Guidebook*⁴ and the establishment of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Online Volunteering service, both occurring in 2000. The UNV Online Volunteering⁵ service defines online (virtual) volunteers as “people who commit their time and skills over the internet, freely and without financial considerations, for the benefit of society.” Today, the vast majority of volunteers are matched with opportunities via some form of ICT. While much of this work will then be carried out onsite, virtual volunteering refers to the engagement of volunteers exclusively online. There are several pieces of academic research on the field of virtual volunteering which provide a good starting point for this study. The primary resources for this literature review, however, are the aforementioned UNV Online Volunteering service and *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook*, which have been chosen because of their detailed attention to organisational considerations unique to virtual volunteering. This paper will draw out the key considerations identified across these, and other sources, before moving on to explore areas for possible development. These areas for innovation are: the practice and status of virtual volunteering in Australia; the potential role of social media for virtual volunteer-involving organisations; other forms of digital engagement and their relevance to virtual volunteering; and the role of youth in the development of virtual volunteering.

Credits

This research was undertaken by Volunteering Qld as part of our innovative engagement initiatives. The research was authored by James Schier and supervised by Mark Creyton.

¹ http://www.informationeconomy.sa.gov.au/digital_engagement

² <http://digitalengagement.org/manifesto-2/>

³ See http://www.internetartisans.co.uk/socnets_with_old_tech_egypt for a research paper on this phenomenon in Egypt

⁴ Cravens, Jayne; Ellis, Susan J. (2000). *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook*. [online] Palo Alto, California: Impact Online, Inc [accessed 3 May 2011] <<http://www.serviceleader.org/virtual/guidebook>>

⁵ <http://www.onlinevolunteering.org>

Theoretical background

A possible criticism of ICT (and, by extension, the practice of virtual volunteering) emerging from the academic literature is the **digital gap**, which describes the view that “individual access to information and communication technology is frequently determined by social background...it has been argued that the internet is the domain of the wealthy, and poor people are unlikely to benefit from it in any way.”⁶ While this is a prevailing issue – stemming from fundamental socioeconomic disparities between groups within society – there are numerous ways in which ICT can be employed in a manner that will benefit those from developing countries and lower socioeconomic groups. The ‘C’ in ICT (standing for communication) has only more recently become a primary use for the internet: “...the internet has now developed into both an information tool and a social interactive environment that fulfils our most important social needs.”⁷

The above cited article focuses on the positive informative and communicative potential of virtual volunteering, from the perspective of the volunteer. The advantages of digital engagement are considered from an individual, interpersonal, and group perspective. These advantages include but are by no means limited to: increased access to information; greater possibility for dyadic communication; offering new ways for volunteers to frame their identity; ease for groups in disseminating information; overcoming the tension between individual autonomy; and group cooperation. Another relevant piece of research looks at the broader role of volunteering in an **information society**, identifying “two types of actions: one where volunteers help others to make better use of ICT for their human development processes, and the other where ICT are utilized as channels and resources for volunteering.”⁸ The first action can be related to the digital gap: the work of volunteers and associated organisations in spreading access to ICT as a way of closing this gap. The second speaks to both virtual volunteering and more broadly to the enormous potential (much of which is already being capitalised on) that ICT hold for engaging volunteers. A recent study⁹ into the involvement of older adults in virtual volunteering draws some interesting conclusions, and provides a means for extrapolating to a more fundamental view of virtual volunteering. It presents a snapshot of the changing nature of volunteer engagement: in the context of a globally aging population, virtual volunteering makes accessing this growing pool of potential volunteers easier and, in some cases, possible where it was not previously. “Virtual volunteering offers a mechanism to ensure participation of highly-skilled older adults by limiting physical presence and mobility requirements.”¹⁰ The feedback received in this qualitative study indicated that the majority of the volunteers considered work outcomes as the best measure of success. “The tasks were chosen by volunteers in accordance to their zones of experience,” such as “writing project reports, preparing audit statements, updating websites.”¹¹ What these findings indicate is that, with this particular group of older adults at least, the difference between virtual and onsite volunteering is primarily (or even exclusively) the mode of engagement.

It is interesting to consider the findings in this report against a study on the involvement of youth in volunteering. This study, which compared the behaviours, attitudes, and outcomes of youth and adults volunteering to assist at-risk youth, found that the youth volunteers were focussed more on relationships, while the adult volunteers were concerned primarily with service provision.¹² This contrast seems to echo the above insight into older adult volunteers, and speaks to the possibility of a fundamental difference in how youth and adults engage as volunteers. Based on this connection, it would appear worthwhile to consider a new and different form of digital engagement, either tailored to or modelled on, a youth engagement model. The potential for one-to-one interaction via ICT, for example, is a possible way in which the emphasis on relationship building in the volunteer realm can be brought into virtual volunteering.

⁶ Amichai-Hamburger, Yair. “Potential and Promise of Online Volunteering” (2007) 545

⁷ *Ibid*, 547

⁸ Acevedo, Manuel. “Volunteering in the Information Society” (2005), 5

⁹ Mukherjee, Dhruvodi. “Participation of Older Adults in Virtual Volunteering: A Qualitative Analysis” (2010)

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 256

¹¹ *Ibid*, 258

¹² Haski-Leventhal, Debbie; Natti Ronel; Alan S. York; and Boaz M. Ben-David. “Youth volunteering for youth: Who are they serving? How are they being served?” (2007), 836

The study into youth volunteering found that motivations to volunteer were generally quite similar between youth and adult volunteers, with some key differences: "...some motivations were more important in youth volunteering, such as socialisation to pro-social behaviour, self-actualisation and peer pressure."¹³ Engaging individuals at a young age is a well-established way to cultivate life-long volunteering: "Adults who began volunteering at adolescence are twice more likely to volunteer than those who did not volunteer when they were younger (Independent Sector 2001; Oesterle, Johnson, & Mortimer, 2004)."¹⁴ The youth of today are being raised in an increasingly digitalised social setting, so it would seem natural for youth to take a position of leadership in shaping the future of digital engagement broadly, and virtual volunteering more specifically. This is discussed as one of the future considerations at the end of this paper.

¹³ *Ibid*, 836

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 835



**VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING ENABLES AN
INCREASE IN THE NUMBER AND QUALITY
OF POTENTIAL VOLUNTEERS**

Virtual volunteering in practice

There are a number of advantages to engaging and utilising the services of volunteers online rather than onsite, such as: overcoming geographical obstacles to volunteer involvement, cost reduction, automating much of the screening process, reducing the organisation's environmental impact and increasing efficiency. These advantages from the volunteer-involving organisation's perspective are mirrored by the increased attractiveness of volunteering to professional organisations. Those who may have been unwilling to allow their staff to go offsite to volunteer may be more willing to allow them to volunteer virtually. In short, virtual volunteering enables an increase in the number and quality of potential volunteers, as well as representing a potential for increased efficiency and productivity, and decreased environmental impact. For these gains to be made, however, a virtual volunteering program needs to be implemented in a thoughtful manner. "An important step is to gain clarity on how online volunteers can support your organization. Consider the tasks that need to be fulfilled and how online volunteers' skills may complement your organization's development efforts."¹⁵ Assessing the organisation's need for virtual volunteer involvement can be aided by the distinction offered in *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook* between "technical assistance volunteers" and "direct contact volunteers."¹⁶ Technical assistance volunteers are those people providing voluntary service that helps with the running of an organisation (e.g. IT support, legal advice, accounting services), whereas direct contact volunteers are those who engage with the clients for whom the organisation provides a service.

Planning and administration

Planning is crucial to the success of a virtual volunteering program, and must include clearly defined goals, expectations and scheduling. The immediacy of online communication demands that volunteer position descriptions have been written *before* recruitment begins. The UNV Online Volunteering site is a fantastic resource for providing a concise overview of virtual volunteer management approaches. The key elements to planning outlined by the UNV are:

Clearly defined tasks: Make sure to break down your needs into well-defined tasks. An assignment focusing on one distinct task will increase your chances of finding qualified online volunteers.

Starting small: Start with just one or two short-term, simple assignments to get used to working with online volunteers.

Being prepared to start immediately: Online volunteers apply at a time when their personal and work schedule allows for their volunteering activities.

Schedule: A rough schedule outlined in the opportunity description will help interested online volunteers decide whether they can commit to the task.

Feedback for development: To enable your organisation to continue benefiting from your online volunteers' knowledge well into future, consider each assignment as a learning opportunity.¹⁷

The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook emphasises the need for regular communication with potential and active volunteers. This is of even greater importance for virtual volunteers, who "can feel isolated or undervalued, and gradually lose their inspiration for the work your organisation is doing."¹⁸ Effective and regular communication – across all stages – is paramount to the success of a virtual volunteering program.

¹⁵ http://www.onlinevolunteering.org/en/org/resources/are_you_ready.html

¹⁶ *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook*, 3

¹⁷ http://www.onlinevolunteering.org/en/org/resources/opportunity_planning.html

¹⁸ *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook*, 6

Engaging virtual volunteers requires a flexible approach to all aspects of the program, and this must be considered during implementation. The implementation of a virtual volunteering program is best achieved when the entire organisation is at a suitable level of online connectivity (or should be done in parallel with such a move). *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook* offers the following advice for the initial implementation: "...one way to begin is to create an online component of a phone or face-to-face support group. You already have these volunteers, you already screen them and manage them," which is coupled with a crucial piece of cautionary advice, that "it's imperative that the person in charge of this program support the idea."¹⁹ Effective communication is a crucial element to successful implementation and the channels for feedback – both from management to staff/volunteer and vice versa – should be open from the very beginning. Most organisations already use online tools for volunteer recruitment purposes, and some of the good practices from online recruitment become even more important when the volunteer goes virtual. "The best type of screening is self-screening. Your goal should be that, after learning about your organisation and your expectations, applicants can decide whether the available virtual volunteering assignments are for them or not."²⁰ Services such as the UNV Online Volunteering website enable organisations to recruit volunteers in a highly effective manner, afforded by the prominence of such a large organisation. The application process of the UNV Online Volunteering service includes a form for written responses to questions on motivation, work and volunteer history, skills and qualifications, language skills, availability, additional information, as well as a resume upload facility. This flexibility could effectively be extended to the use of new communication mediums, the most obvious being social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube, which will be considered in more detail below.

The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook advises that "your online orientation be done via email rather than via your website; this is much more efficient for both you and the volunteer. It also gives you feedback as to whether or not the volunteer is reading and understanding what you send."²¹ The guidebook also suggests giving a face to both oneself as a volunteer manager and the organisation as a whole, with the aim of alleviating feelings of isolation and alienation virtual volunteers could experience. There are a number of ways this could be achieved: through email exchanges, a bio page on the organisation's website, or with the aid of social media. Like any volunteer program, a virtual volunteer program needs to inform prospective volunteers of policies and expectations from the outset. An organisation engaging volunteers obviously does so because a task needs doing or a role needs filling, but it is important to be flexible to tailor tasks to match the virtual volunteer's skills and interests.²² Once again, communication is critical: "...open communication channels so that questions can be addressed as they arise, as well as 'routine communications' to provide a structure and reinforce expectations."²³ As mentioned above, this will help to avoid alienating virtual volunteers, but it is also a way for the volunteer manager to supervise the work being done. Inclusion of virtual volunteers should extend to informing them of important changes to the organisation, inviting them to appropriate events, and updating them on the progress of other volunteer activities.

¹⁹ *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook*, 66

²⁰ *Ibid*, 37

²¹ *Ibid*, 38

²² *Ibid*, 39

²³ <http://fyics.ifas.ufl.edu/newsletters/mcyu08/bolton908.htm>

²⁴ *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook*, 63-64

²⁵ *Ibid*, 10

Formally recognising the work done by virtual volunteers should be of a high priority for the organisation. *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook* offers excellent advice for recognising volunteer work, whether it was done online or onsite, such as:

- Be timely: the most effective form of thanks follows the completion of a significant part of an assignment
- Everyone should be appreciated
- Recognition is everyone's job – not just the program manager's
- Inclusion is the best form of recognition: most online volunteers who have communicated with the VV Project cite inclusion as the way they most appreciate being recognised
- Publicise volunteer activities and outcomes
- Ensure consistency of recognition given to both onsite and online volunteers
- Asking for the volunteer's input is a form of recognition²⁴

The UNV Online Volunteering service provides certificates of appreciation, giving the volunteer a tangible memento of gratitude for their virtual volunteering. The emphasis on communication throughout the virtual volunteer program is all about cultivating a strong, long lasting relationship between the organisation and the virtual volunteer. In the 2010 Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet Report, *National Volunteering Strategy Consultation Report*, the feedback received indicated that more needs to be done in Australia to formally and publicly acknowledge the contribution volunteers make to society. This feedback, coming primarily from volunteer-involving practitioners, provides useful insight and data for the formulation of some virtual volunteering guidelines specific to Australian organisations.

Challenges and obstacles

There are a number of challenges and barriers to the adoption of virtual volunteering noted in the literature. The most obvious concern is organisational access to sufficient quality ICT resources. Furthermore, the speed with which technology and associated communication mediums develop, and the need to familiarise oneself with the plethora of existing ICT platforms, are significant barriers to overcome. These technological capabilities are crucial considerations.

From an organisational perspective, *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook* notes that online communication, when executed at a quality level, can be time consuming. This problem is only amplified as the virtual volunteer base grows. Increasing an organisations geographical reach potentially introduces issues of cultural difference too, requiring an organisational awareness and sensitivity to dealing with people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Security and confidentiality concerns can act as a barrier for management as well, “particularly when dealing with vulnerable populations.”²⁵ There are, however, ways to mitigate these privacy risks with correct protocol and data security technology. The impersonality of digital engagement doesn't come naturally to most and can be difficult. However, through practice, managers can learn to give tone and personality to their digital communications. In addition, the use of tools such as Skype, which is very similar to a face-to-face conversation, can overcome these barriers.

All of these issues need to be considerations for digital engagement and virtual volunteering. ICT resources, time requirements, security and impersonal communication can all pose challenges. However, while these obstacles need to be addressed, all these risks can be mitigated or overcome by organisations passionate about digital engagement.



**MORE YOUTH ARE VOLUNTEERING
TODAY THAN EVER BEFORE
AND THEY ARE VOLUNTEERING
IN NEW AND INNOVATIVE WAYS**

Future considerations

The *National Volunteering Strategy Consultation Report* found that “respondents felt there was a need to promote volunteering to emerging sectors of the community, most prominently young people and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.”²⁶ This insight opens out into a number of avenues that deserve further investigation in relation to the practices of virtual volunteer-involving organisations. Embracing new forms of technology, such as social networking, is a prominent suggestion for connecting with a broader range of potential volunteers. Incorporating social networking into the volunteer engagement process has the potential to address some of the other issues arising out of the consultation, such as cost reduction, volunteer retention and recognition, and volunteer opportunity diversification. Based on the feedback received, a model for improving the promotion and awareness of volunteering in Australia would include “a comprehensive online portal to access available opportunities for volunteer participation.”²⁷

More youth are volunteering today than ever before²⁸, and they are volunteering in new and innovative ways that fit with their lifestyle and work commitments. Particularly in this youth demographic but also in the wider volunteering sphere, there appears to be an increase in the number of potential volunteers looking for short term, project oriented volunteer roles, in contrast with the long term volunteer-organisation relationships of the past. These possible, and actual, changes to the way in which volunteers are engaging and working with organisations poses some new challenges and opportunities for policy makers.

²⁶ “National Volunteering Strategy Consultation Report,” 12

²⁷ *Ibid*, 9

²⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Voluntary Work” (2006), 74

Virtual volunteering in Australia

Online portals, which list volunteer opportunities in much the same way as a careers website lists job vacancies, already operate in Australia, and they provide organisations with a powerful resource with which to promote opportunities at very little cost. One thing these portals often lack is an option for virtual volunteer opportunities in the search criteria. This obviously doesn't preclude organisations posting virtual volunteering roles, but it makes the task of finding them much harder for the potential virtual volunteer. The site **volunteermatch.org** is a good example of how easy and effective the inclusion of a virtual option can be: the search function has a field for location and keywords, and a check box offering "Search for Virtual Opportunities" as an option. Providing potential volunteers with this as a search option should also make organisations more aware and more willing to consider a virtual volunteering program. Questions about the best way to go about moving the sector forward in Australia need to be addressed more thoroughly, including the need for, and possible content of, public policy on virtual volunteering, and evaluating and up skilling organisations to this end.

Key questions

- What can peak bodies do to encourage and promote virtual volunteering to organisations and volunteers?
- What are the public and organisational policy issues unique to virtual volunteering?
- Does virtual engagement create new possibilities for volunteering tasks?
- What tasks are most suitable for virtual volunteers in Australia?

Social media and virtual volunteering

Integrating a social media strategy into a virtual volunteering program presents a range of issues and opportunities for digital engagement. Organisational policies need to be put in place before any social media presence is initiated, with clear guidelines for online behaviour (including what employees and volunteers can and can't say about the organisation on their personal social networking pages)²⁹. There is a huge amount of advice online for the use of social media by not-for-profits, with some common key points regarding authority of staff and volunteers as well as steering clear of defamation. One particular consideration is the need to be constantly cognisant of the fact that this is social *networking* - a medium based fundamentally on reciprocal communication and engagement³⁰. It is not a platform (like a website or a newsletter) for one-way communication, from the organisation to the community. It is a place where the community can publicly engage with the organisation in real time. This demands that the organisation be prepared to give up control of the conversation to a certain extent. The *social* element of social networking also presents challenges for the volunteer-involving organisation as there is a need to make a decision about the online persona it will adopt from the beginning, and to stay consistent across all platforms. These, and several other issues, need to be considered by the organisation when making a decision about the use of social media as a means for engaging with virtual volunteers.

Different social media platforms allow for different types of interaction and each have their own unique strengths and weaknesses. Well known platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, in addition to the recent Google+, have become common communication and interaction mediums in society.

²⁹ See <http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/useOfSocialMedia.pdf> for an example of a social media policy

³⁰ Most of the basic points explored about non-profit uses of social media are drawn from <http://www.slideshare.net/VolunteerHoward/web-social-media-strategies-for-volunteer-engagement>

Beyond these social networking sites, several large blogging engines such as wordpress.com, blogger.com and tumblr.com allow users, including businesses and organisations, to tap into a vast pool of potential 'friends' or 'followers'. Despite this, specific platforms tend to attract certain demographic groups and, therefore, organisations need to be aware of who their target audience is and what their preferred platform would be in order to successfully engage using social media. More professional social media platforms such as LinkedIn.com and elements of Google+ allow for a more formal and professional approach to engagement. At the other extreme, social gaming platforms known as MMOG (massively multiplayer online game), such as Second Life, have also been used as engagement tools. For example one could hold a virtual meeting in the 'persistent world' of a chosen gaming platform using peoples' avatars. Using these technologies opens up the possibility for using a wide range of gaming consoles for engagement including the Wii, Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3 as well as portable consoles such as the Nintendo DS and PSP - not to mention a vast array of smart phones. Other platforms such as Skype and MSN allow for free, rapid, worldwide communication and can act as excellent tools for engagement. One of the great benefits of utilising these technologies when engaging with virtual volunteers is that organisations are able to tap into a global pool of talent, interest and support.

Given the emphasis on good quality, prompt communication, social media can be seen as a valuable time saving tool. It is common that numerous volunteers will have similar concerns and questions about the volunteer experience and responding to the same questions repeatedly can become tedious and time consuming. An organisational Facebook page, for example, can be used as a public space in which volunteer questions can be answered by the organisation and viewed by others, drastically limiting the need for repeatedly answering the same questions. They can also be collated in a similar manner to FAQs to further utilise the possibilities of social media.

This type of interaction is also good for brainstorming ideas for the organisation, and for community market research. Jonathan Greenblatt from the Anderson School of Management at UCLA, in an interview with **suite101.com**, states that: "...we also bounce ideas off our Facebook fans to see what they like best; for instance, we selected a holiday initiative 'Seasons Greenings' based on feedback from our Facebook page."³¹ This is just a limited snapshot of the positive benefits that can come from a thoughtful social media strategy. Flexibility and creativity are essential in the fast paced and dynamic world of social media, affording a space where new and innovative means of engagement are not only possible, but essential.

Key questions

- What are the key policy considerations for volunteer-involving organisations looking to utilise social media?
- Which types of volunteer-involving organisations would most benefit from a social media campaign? Is it unsuitable for any?
- To what extent should/could social media be used for volunteer recruitment, management, and recognition? Are there any other applications of social media for volunteer engagement and management?

³¹ <http://www.suite101.com/content/nonprofits-and-social-media-a218127>

Other forms of digital volunteer engagement

There are a number of other ways in which people volunteer their services via ICT, most of which fall under the virtual volunteering umbrella. It is useful, however, to consider some of these other forms of volunteer engagement in order to explore their applicability to the work of volunteer-involving organisations. The four main areas of relevant interest are **microvolunteering**, **crowdsourcing**, **emergency response**, and **digital activism**. These are all interrelated and overlapping in many regards, but it is useful to approach each separately. **Microvolunteering** refers to bite (or byte) sized tasks, completed in a small amount of time and with little to no project management or quality review supposedly required from the volunteer-involving organisation.³² **Sparked.com** is a prominent example of a microvolunteering network, allowing organisations to post “challenges” (small projects) for microvolunteers to complete. Quality is controlled by the microvolunteer cohort, with the numerous submissions being peer rated, filtering out the lower quality work. The volunteer-involving organisation is, in theory, presented with the best work, from which the final product is chosen.

This method of volunteer engagement – employed in microvolunteering – is known as **crowdsourcing**:

Crowdsourcing is the act of outsourcing tasks, traditionally performed by an employee or contractor, to a large group of people or community (a crowd), through an open invite (call). Crowdsourcing is typically enabled through online communities consisting of members with common skills or interests and is applied as a model that enables individuals and groups to innovate, create, produce, report, predict, collaborate, fund and to engage customers.³³

Microvolunteering makes use of crowdsourcing methods, but not all voluntary crowdsourced activity is microvolunteering. Crowdsourcing is also associated with ideas focused forms of engagement. OpenIDEO is a prime example of this, aiming to be “a place where people design better, together for social good. It’s an online platform for creative thinkers.”³⁴ This distinction – between a project and ideas crowdsourcing focus – is an important one, for it appears to speak to the level of active engagement between volunteers and organisations. OpenIDEO have a strong emphasis on community cultivation. The first three of their five “principles” are to be **inclusive**, **community-centred**, and **collaborative**.³⁵ Jayne Cravens, co-author of *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook*, makes a valuable insight into the possible pitfalls of microvolunteering and crowdsourcing:

A misconception about micro-blogging and crowd-sourcing – and, indeed, about all volunteering, including in its most traditional forms – is that the goal is to get work done, or to get work done for free... **Volunteering is about so much more: it’s about building relationships with the community...**³⁶ (Emphasis added)

The concerns around volunteer recognition – emphasised as important in a virtual volunteering program by *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook*, and an issue arising from the National Volunteering Strategy consultation process – are amplified by this micro engagement. This problem of recognition is clearly not insurmountable, but it is something that needs attention.

There have been some great recent examples of the power for ICT to facilitate a rapid community response to large scale emergencies. Crowdsourcing is, generally speaking, an integral part of this form of engagement. It is not necessarily limited to virtual volunteering tasks: the listings for volunteer assistance primarily related to a need for goods and services can also be critical and effective.

³² <http://www.sparked.com/microvolunteering>

³³ <http://www.crowdsourcing.org/faq>

³⁴ <http://www.openideo.com/about-us>

³⁵ *lbid*

³⁶ <http://www.coyotecomunications.com/volunteer/microvolunteering.shtml>

There are also good examples of **ongoing** emergency response mechanisms administered via ICT engagement methods, such as **CrisisCommons**. CrisisCommons is an ongoing program which “seeks to advance and support the use of open data and volunteer technology communities to catalyse innovation in crisis management and global development.”³⁷ It allows people to connect via a CrisisCamp – a **wiki** interface through which “people can connect locally and build resources like open data profiles which can be used if there was ever a crisis.”³⁸ The relative strengths and weaknesses of such spontaneous and ongoing modes of volunteer engagement make it apparent that both have a role to play in the digital response to emergency situations.

As mentioned in the introduction, ICT have enabled more people to have their voices heard on matters of social and political significance. **Digital activism** is the broad term for these types of grassroots activities, performed with the aid of digital technologies. The growing number of people worldwide with access to technology enabling instantaneous global connectivity – including, significantly, within repressive States – has enormous potential for enabling activism. **DigiActive.org** “is an all-volunteer organization dedicated to helping grassroots activists around the world use the internet and mobile phones to increase their impact.”³⁹ This is an invaluable resource for individuals and groups attempting to drive significant societal change, providing education, resources, and connections.

Key questions

- Which methods of digital engagement are best suited to various types of volunteer activity?
- Is crowdsourcing a legitimate and/or worthwhile means for community consultation?
- How can ICT facilitate the engagement of activists with volunteer-involving organisations?

Leadership by young people in the virtual realm

There is an opportunity for young people to take a leadership role in the development of these new forms of digital engagement in not-for-profit organisations. As can be seen from the example of young people volunteering to assist at-risk youth, there are some important differences to the ways adults and youth engage with others. The emphasis young people place on relationship building, as opposed to the service provision focus of their adult counterparts, has a strong parallel with the important aspects of virtual engagement. Constant communicative connectivity between organisations and volunteers is emphasised and reiterated everywhere in the literature on virtual volunteering. Youth in the developed world are the biggest users of social media; indeed it is primarily young people who drive innovation in the sector. The research paper “Youth Leading Youth,” undertaken by researchers at Volunteering Qld, found that there is already a natural tendency for these young leaders to offer both **project** and **ongoing** volunteer opportunities⁴⁰ – an outlook well suited to virtual engagement, as is the finding that these organisations generally look to match volunteer **skills** with organisational **needs**.⁴¹

- What role can young people play as leaders in virtual volunteering?
- To what extent is the field currently led by youth?
- How can they be supported and assisted in their role as leaders?
- How can virtual volunteering opportunities be shaped to suit young volunteers?

³⁷ <http://crisiscommons.org/about/>

³⁸ http://wiki.crisiscommons.org/wiki/Main_Page

³⁹ <http://www.digiactive.org/about/>

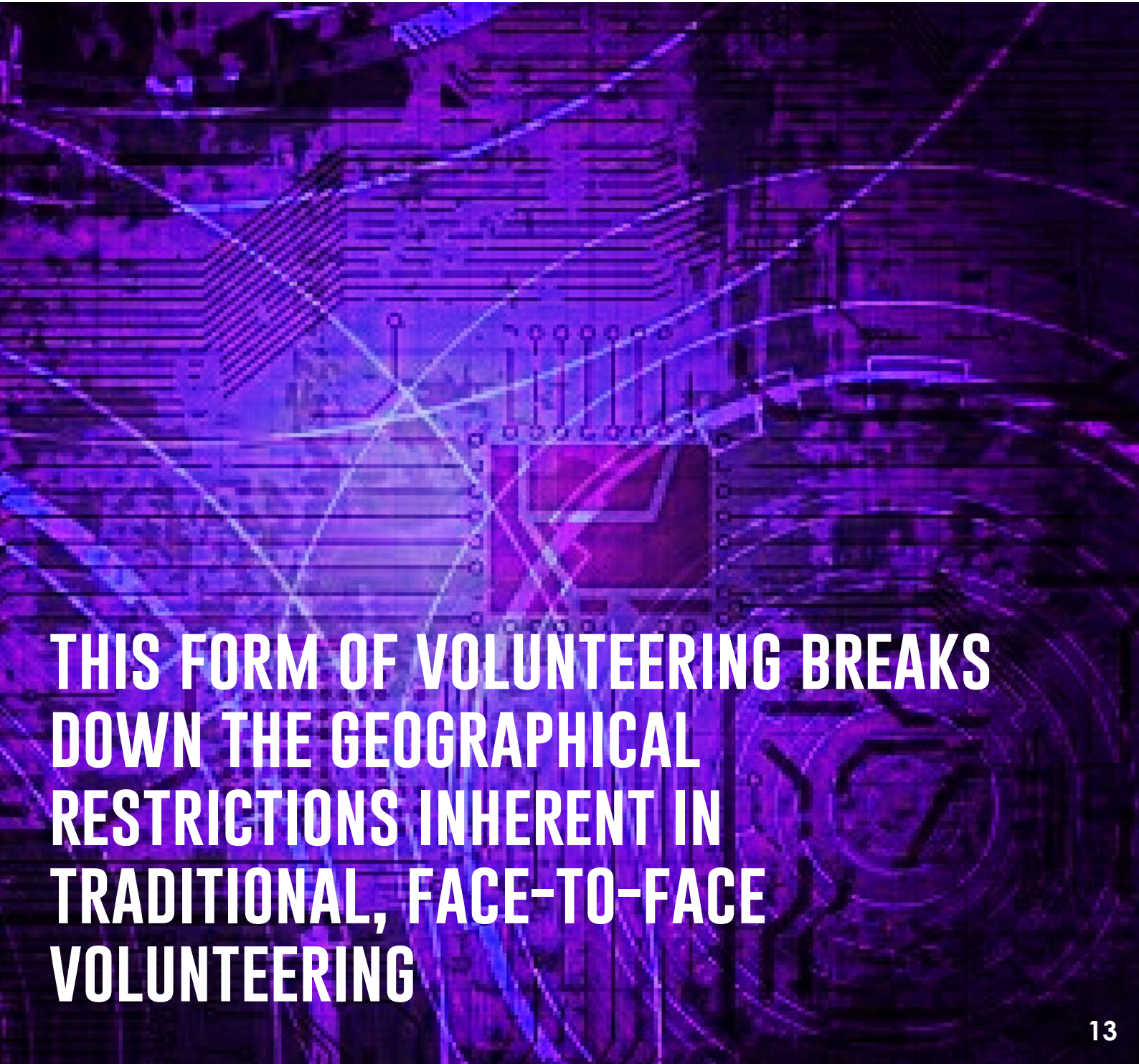
⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 14

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 13

Conclusion

Virtual volunteering presents a number of unique challenges and potentially significant benefits for volunteer-involving organisations. Virtual volunteering is not as well established in Australia as other parts of the world, although it is a growing field. The increasingly mainstream nature of social media gives an added sense of urgency for Australian organisations to embrace digital engagement and virtual volunteering. This form of volunteering breaks down the geographical restrictions inherent in traditional, face-to-face volunteering. The *National Volunteering Strategy Consultation Report* found that 43 percent of respondents would like to be able to volunteer from home or online in the future.⁴² As demonstrated in this paper, there already are some valuable resources on virtual volunteer management, on the use of social media and other online tools for volunteer engagement, and on youth leadership and volunteering. What is lacking is a set of key policy considerations and guidelines that takes these aspects of virtual volunteer involvement, in conjunction with the changing nature of volunteering and the expansion of online community engagement and brings them together in the Australian context.

⁴² "National Volunteering Strategy Consultation Report," 21



**THIS FORM OF VOLUNTEERING BREAKS
DOWN THE GEOGRAPHICAL
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