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Reacting to the Critics

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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During the past month, e-mails have been colliding all over cyberspace discussing a recent editorial published by Nick Cater of the *Guardian* newspaper in the UK titled, "Hidden costs of free time and talent: If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing without volunteers"

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2002/may/09/volunteering.comment>. Cater perpetuates every obnoxious stereotype about volunteering as more of a hindrance than a help, done by unskilled do-gooders to let government off the hook.

Many people posted reactions in various forums (see the archives of ARNOVA-L and CyberVPM for some of the better comments), ranging from "this author should be drawn and quartered" to "this author doesn't deserve our time and attention." A few people were able to distinguish the bad statements from a few insightful ones, but disdain was the rule. Without rehashing what is no longer news, this incident makes me ruminate on how we in the volunteer field react to criticism in general.

Reactions to criticism - and to any forthright opinion expressed publicly in our field - seem to fall into four categories of response:

- "Why Don't They Like Us?"
- "I Can't Be Bothered to Respond" (closely connected to "I'm Too Busy to Respond")
- "I Resent that Opinion So I'll Blame the Speaker"
- "Let's Fight Back"

It's common for us to take criticism personally and try to answer specific issues with anecdotes about the incredibly wonderful volunteers we know (so how can your experience be any different?). As advocates of what we wish the public would think about us, we defensively counter all arguments without distinguishing valid concerns from myths and prejudice. We're often accused of "whining" because we focus on "you're wrong" without necessarily offering a thoughtful alternative opinion - except for those glorious anecdotes.

The two most frustrating aspects of how our field reacts to criticism are playing ostrich and generating backroom chatter. The ostriches simply don't pay attention. They are rarely aware of anything outside their own agencies or, if they read negative commentary, they never reply. More often, there is a good bit of discussion, but it's done as complaining to each other (on practitioner listservs, in the halls of conferences) rather than expressing opinions in forums where they might educate others. In general, volunteerism practitioners don't like to make waves. Isn't this ironic for a field that owes its history to pioneers and activists? A profession must stand for something and its members must stand for the profession.

We are a field that is uncomfortable with confrontation. We sometimes forget that there is such a thing as the "loyal opposition." And that our work is complex enough to have many gray areas about which good people can disagree. *If you want to see some of the more common challenges to our field, click on Jayne Craven's "anti" message list in the [Trends and Issues](#) category of the Library.*

So what can we do?

Recognize the Real Problems

Let's be honest. There is still a lot of lousy volunteering out there! There are indeed organizations that exploit volunteers, treat them badly, and don't value the work of the volunteer program manager. There are politicians and governments looking to volunteers to substitute for adequate funding of services. We have colleagues who were hired for the wrong reasons and who are retained because of low standards.

We ought to be able to agree with critics who point out these issues. In fact, we shouldn't wait for others to see the need for change. Being proactive in bringing bad volunteer practices to light would serve everyone. I once suggested that AVA announce an insult-to-injury "award" whenever someone in the public arena said or did something outrageous in terms of volunteer involvement. This may not be what AVA feels appropriate for itself, but the concept has been applied by other fields to some effect.

Educate Up

Individually, all we can do is excel in our work. Actually, that's quite an accomplishment. But we can become smarter about educating "up" within our own organizations, so that executives, board members, and funders become advocates themselves for the value of volunteers. We need to be consistent spokespeople for the impact of volunteering - when effectively facilitated. This means reporting on the achievements of volunteers, not just the data about them. It means transforming recognition events into opportunities to celebrate impact. It means assuring that we recruit the best volunteers and keep them visible to everyone.

Educate Out

In addition, we need to send press releases to the media that focus on hard news, not on soft news: it may be lovely that you gave an award to your 95-year-old volunteer, but you'll deserve more press

coverage for the five teenagers who, despite almost dropping out of school last year, won college scholarships thanks to the tutoring of their volunteers. When we begin to share "hard news" messages, it will have a ripple effect on what others think of our work. Right now, remember, most of the public -and reporters - only hear about us when we are trying to recruit new volunteers or when we throw a party (i.e., the recognition event with the usual photo of smiling certificate holders).

Act Under the Umbrella of Our Professional Networks

One of the most important things about professional networks, especially at the local and state/provincial level is that they offer protection! Rather than acting individually, perhaps risking the reputation of your employer, you can use your professional network to share the blame of public action! To the press, formal responses from professional organizations carry more clout than one person's opinion. Having a public issues committee empowered to send letters to officials or the media also allows for consensus building. But the response mechanism has to work fast! Deliberations of even several weeks about how to respond usually means missing the boat in responding effectively at all. It ought to be possible to develop a consistent set of beliefs which, if challenged publicly, provide the basis for a prompt reply.

What suggestion can you add?

How do you respond to criticism of volunteering?

What can one person do?

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Submitted on 02June24 by Sally McKirgan, Volunteer Program Manager

The only problem we have as Volunteer Administrators is that we do not do enough to "sell" and "rave" about our programs and what is accomplished by volunteers! I submit that we need to sell, sell, sell every chance we get. If our programs are not valued it is because we have not done a good enough job on this point. For instance...what dollar value does your organization place on volunteer hours? I am currently fighting to use the \$16.05 as the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics places on volunteer value. HR is worried about what the employees will think especially since they are paid quite a bit less! Do you have some arguments and should I care about the dollar value? Why?

Submitted on 02June13 by Laurie Thomas, Volunteer Coordinator - SJMC, Tulsa, OK

This topic was a breathe of spring. It is very hard for us to admit that we need to be pro-active and do long range planning - not just react to daily needs. Evaluation is the piece of the program that most administrators including myself like the least and have the most difficulty doing well. We need to stop for a moment and give ourselves and our programs the gift of time - time to plan, time to access, time to make the tough decisions well.

Submitted on 02June12 by Lacreitia Bacon, Phoenix, Arizona

As I have read this, (and audibly cheered in a couple places) I first identified with those who have basically said "I tried it here (my network, my organization, etc) and there's still no movement." As I

read the responses, it occurred to me that we are downplaying our own individual power. And, with the small action of redefining a word, missing a great opportunity. Individually, we should be well acquainted with the power of one to effect change. After all, isn't that where the essence of volunteering lies? But we increasingly need the power of community to create a support structure, to create a constituency, and to be heard in the incredible information "clutter" that is our society today.

I suggest that we stop looking for the support and constituency in our immediate surroundings (i.e. organization, network, etc.) and look to the power of the Internet to build our own community. Susan is bold enough to use this editorial portion of her business' Web presence to examine both positive and negative aspects of the field. Some claim that only her own opinions are those aired, but yet the response list often contains a core of regulars and only affirmations of her point(s).

This is a good place to start, by having more interaction here. Where can we find dialog? Where are the statements and rebuttals? Where are the other thoughtful editorials? Most often, the answer is on the Web. Our challenge appears not to create, but to adjust our thinking to that of "the community exists." It is small, but it's out there. Our biggest puzzle is how to organize ourselves around this presence rather than around a geographical location or existing organization. Critical mass will be achieved, and then the voice will be heard. Remember, the book "Horton Hears A Who" by Dr. Suess has a core message about community activism. How we define the community is up to us.

Submitted on 2002 June 11 by Rosie Williams, Manager of Volunteer Programs, Adelaide, South Australia

Thank you for bringing this topic "out of the closet." This field is certainly an interesting one and I believe now more than ever in Australia anyway. (I have been around working in Volunteerism for 12 years!). I have found that in general my fellow professionals seem more than reluctant to examine our practice and look closely at the why.... why do we do things this way? Why are we involving volunteers in this or that program, why are there so many myths and misconceptions about the role we hold as Volunteer Managers and about volunteerism in general..... and what are some strategies we can develop to address these?

I have aimed to include a 'debate' section as a standing item on the agendas of several volunteer manager network meetings here in Adelaide, where we can discuss the above in a safe forum and more often than not I find that it has fallen off the agenda. I can only assume that people in the field here seem, or are reluctant to hear, that perhaps there is another way of doing things or that someone has another opinion to their own! So I take this opportunity to challenge my fellow workers here in Adelaide to make sure that it stays on the agenda and lets get some healthy debate going, lets examine what we are doing and how we are doing it, lets be open to criticism and lets get it straight in our own minds so that we are then able to make sensible comment to those out there who disagree with volunteerism. Maybe I am odd but I think it could be great fun ! Come on I dare you.....:0)

Submitted on 2002 June 7 by Larisa Vanstien, State Community Education Office, Department of Fisheries, Western Australia

I completely agree with Susan when she states "being proactive in bringing bad volunteer practices to

light would serve everyone." We know what these bad practices are ... come on - we talk about them amongst ourselves all the time! We regularly discuss how we can overcome them and how we can encourage others to 'see the light'. It certainly returns us to the issue of best practice standards, and how each and every one of us can contribute to raising the profile, and professionalism, of volunteering.

Submitted on 2002June6 by Andy Fryar, President - Volunteering Australia, Adelaide, Australia

Thanks again Susan for raising a very important issue. It raises lots of thoughts and challenges for us all and I could write a response of several pages! However, I guess there are two key points you make that I feel need highlighting.

Firstly, we must all be willing to challenge the myths and stereotypes of volunteering when they arise rather than (as you say) simply talking about them amongst ourselves. Only 2 weeks ago I challenged one of the most controversial columnists from our weekly Sunday paper, via a letter to the editor, about some things he wrote about volunteers the previous week. His reaction was to phone and challenge what I had said. I was really pleased when he told me he NEVER followed up criticism, so obviously it hit a nerve (God forbid that he shouldn't be an expert on something as 'easy' as volunteerism!). The result, well we will see ...but hopefully the next time he writes or speaks about volunteers he will take a different tact. The point of this illustration is that without challenging the myths nothing ever changes ...and change is rarely a warm and fuzzy experience!

There is a bigger issue at the core here though (I believe), and that stems not so much from being busy, or choosing to ignore comments, but simply from many of us having never taken the time to really understand what it is we do and the impact that our professional roles play. For instance, how many Volunteer Management courses examine the 'anti-volunteerism' argument? Why is it that such a small proportion of us ever respond to list servs and other forums such as this one? In short - how many of us know why we believe what we believe? I'll leave you with that thought!

Submitted on 2002June6 by Ellie Collier, Director, Office of Volunteer Opportunities, University of St. Thomas, Texas USA

One way to head off criticism, or at least be prepared to deal with it, is to continuously develop our professionalism as volunteer administrators. Doing so increases the credibility and standing of the profession.

Submitted on 2002June5 by Marsha Riddle, N.C.

What a great opportunity to bring to light that the Volunteer Program Administrator truly has the chance to explore the positive and negatives of the profession and be prepared to respond creatively. Who ever said that it didn't cost money for a volunteer program and that volunteering didn't cost money for the volunteer? We are not talking about free, we are talking about the importance and value of volunteerism and the volunteer for all roles from the Boards of Directors of organizations to the mentor who makes an impact on the life of a child.

This was an opportunity to educate the readers of this new paper of the tremendous variety of volunteering that occurs in our programs, as well as that of the others in the profession. How do we do this? We prepare, we tell the story over and over again of the teen volunteer who is now Director of Staff Development in our agency, or the teen who turned a troubled past into a caring adult who adopts foster children rather than continuing the cycle of failure, all because someone made a difference in their life. That's why facts and figures are not enough to explain our programs. We must find the stories, tell them ourselves and hold high their importance. We must ask that same reporter to judge our award activities or speak to our group. We must not close out the other point of view, but use it as an opportunity to educate, one person at a time.

Let's research, study, use the real facts, detail the cost, and understand that it cost money for a successful volunteer program, Lets tell our supervisors, directors, boards, and the negative reporter that cost and value are different, and that replacement of staff has never been the reason for a volunteer program. How about involving volunteers in advocacy for the cause, education of thier families, peers, friends, and the community, and working as a part of the team of professionals who are employed to do the job.

We are talking about quality not quantity and change in attitudes and the acceptance of people who are view as different or less important in the world. A government or system that meets all needs of all people, controls life and living. Volunteers fought and died for our freedoms and the opportunity to live in a world where people (volunteers) are needed every day to help their neighbors and give of their time talents and money to make the world a better place.

Submitted on 2002June5 by Kouka Allen, President, Board of Directors, Waimaha/Sunflower Residents' Association Inc., Hawaii, US

I really have my personal doubts about the value of my efforts many times. However, I can't seem to just quit! I often wonder what would happen if I did? Certainly nothing earth moving, I'm sure. But if I did quit, all the effort and personal expense that I have put out over the last 3 to 4 years would be for naught. And if anyone tried to pick-up what I leave undone, they wouldl be very reluctant to try and accomplish what I have already done.

Submitted on 2002June4 by Deirdre Araujo, Manager Volunteer Services, San Francisco, CA USA

It's so interesting that this has come up in a larger forum, since I've been dealing with it on a personal level for some time now. Each time we have dinner with two of our good friends, the husband - a science teacher - talks about how little he values my profession, and how volunteering is just slave labor, etc., etc. (I manage volunteers in a science museum.) My husband has taken to slipping a packet of some kind of antacid into my pocket before we arrive --just to help keep my sense of humor up. I wonder if this can be explored further at the ICVA in Denver this October?

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