

# GIVING A BIT:

CHARITABLE FUNDRAISING
IN OUR DIGITAL AGE

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# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report is based on a review of evidence and ten interviews with decision-makers and charity employees responsible for fundraising carried out in July 2019. Interviewees were approached from a range of charities selected to represent a range of concerns, organisation sizes and history of operation. We believe that although charitable fundraising has been revolutionised by digital channels, care should be taken as larger players enter the space, and there remain major opportunities for improving how charities and digital platforms interact.

- Platforms should exclude charitable giving data and charitable interest data from user profiles as used to target advertising. We believe that taken as a whole, fundraising data is likely to reflect protected characteristics, and as such should be excluded as part of data use policies.
- The process behind the ranking of charities on fundraisers is currently unclear to both charities and users. Platforms should collaborate with charities in order to create a fair ranking system, the process of which is transparent to charities.
- In order to anticipate changes once development is made more clear, charities should reflect the possibility of algorithmic change in risk assessments when forecasting fundraising.

- Centralisation of fundraising may skew funding towards established and large-scale charities.
   Differentiating by size and nature of cause may help promote newer or nicher causes make successful use of online platforms.
- Platforms must improve transparency around acceptable data use, and should where possible allow donors to opt in to additional contact from charities

In summary, we believe that despite probable good intentions behind major platforms moving into the fundraising space, care should be taken by platforms, government and regulators to ensure those intentions do not lead to un-level playing fields, dependence or a growing gap between charities and their patrons. The availability and ease of access provided by digital tools is unparalleled, and a major benefit to the third sector, but their impact on charities and their use of fundraising data should not go unscrutinised.

# INTRODUCTION

Raising money for causes has been transformed by the internet. Charities are now able to reach out to, engage with and raise money from supporters through dozens of online platforms and tools. The rise of dedicated platforms, social campaigning and new models of crowdsourced funding have provided both challenges and opportunities to charities adapting to the new environment.

On the heels of platforms like JustGiving and GoFundMe, the largest digital platforms have begun offering fundraising services. Facebook launched its 'charitable giving tools' in the UK in 2016, with Amazon Smile, allowing shoppers to donate a portion of their spend to charity, launched a year later in 2017. Earlier this year, Facebookowned Instagram launched 'donate stickers'.

Charities have broadly embraced these opportunities, with many citing accessibility and speed as major benefits. But digital fundraising has also raised new challenges for charities and the charitable sector as a whole. There remain major questions about the status and usage of charitable fundraising data by platforms; about the possible barriers to long-term relationship-building caused by digital intermediaries; and about the dangers of centralisation, monopolisation and algorithmic optimisation.

A thriving third sector is vital to civil society. This short briefing paper presents the findings of desk-based research and ten interviews with experts from across the charitable sector. It looks to explore the current practices, opportunities and challenges presented by the rise of digital fundraising. The report is split into four sections, and each concludes with recommendations for ways in which platforms and charities might change to improve the fundraising landscape online.

These sections are:

### Section 1 - Privacy and Data

How data is being collected and the privacy implications for social media platforms having access to charitable fundraising data.

### **Section 2 - Transparency**

The transparency of the processes involved in social media fundraising.

#### **Section 3 - Centralisation**

The impact of the increased prominence of social media platforms.

### Section 4 - Engagement and Sustainability

How engagement has changed in the face of social media fundraising tools and how this has affected the relationship between charities and donors.

### Methodology

This report is based on a review of evidence and ten interviews with decision-makers and charity employees responsible for fundraising carried out in July 2019. Interviewees were approached from a range of charities selected to represent a range of concerns, organisation sizes and history of operation.

Interviews were semi-structured and turned on a set of questions developed through the evidence review. Participants were free to speak on or off the record and, where quotations have been used, that preference has been reflected in the attribution. We are immensely grateful to each person who gave up their time to speak to us.

# SECTION 1 PRIVACY & DATA

Personal data protection is a central concern of government regulation and legislation, and digital platforms as a whole are under increasing scrutiny around their practices around data collection, retention and use. Charitable fundraising and its associated data should form a key part of this scrutiny.

Platforms tend to default to making the act of charitable giving a public action: one major platform displays which of a user's contacts have donated to a certain charity, while others encourage the sharing of fundraisers and donations.

All the charities that we spoke to took their responsibility to safeguard data very seriously, with all having robust internal processes. The importance of safeguarding data was reflected in concerns that the use of third-party platforms to fundraise opened the possibility of the charities being impacted by failures in data protection by those platforms. Given the perceived sensitivity of this data, there was concern raised that a leak or hack may have reputational consequences for a charity, and while this hasn't happened yet, it is seen as a distinct possibility.

"I don't think platforms like Facebook have demonstrated the kind of respect for personal data that we would like to see"

## **Executive Director of Fundraising and Engagement - Large Charity**

Significantly, some interviewees noted that the act of charitable giving was highly personal, and often a reflection of a personal cause or concern. An individual donating to a cancer research charity, for example, may have been personally affected by the disease. Similarly, an LGBT person may choose to donate to an LGBT charity. Disability and sexuality are protected characteristics, and there was concern expressed that fundraising data could inadvertently disclose personal information.

"A donation can be an important data point that contributes to making inferences about religion, political leaning or health issues."

## Dr Carissa Véliz, Research Fellow - The Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics

This challenge is multiplied in an industry modelled on the use of data to profile internet users. It is not far-fetched to imagine, for instance, an insurance company opting to exclude users from their advertising based on data indicating a hereditary illness. Similar data points could inform an understanding of risk in geographic or demographic groups.

Equally, data collected about individuals can be either wholly wrong or inferred inaccurately. For example, a recent survey by Deloitte found that much of the data collected by a large US data broker was "bad data"- data that users felt did not accurately reflect themselves. It is not difficult to imagine the risk of using inaccurate data in order to profile individuals.

"Even when this data is wrong, it can still impact people in a negative way. If someone with the same name as you had a criminal record, you could be denied opportunities on account of a mistake regarding identity, and you might not even know about it."

### Dr Carissa Véliz, Research Fellow - The Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics

However, not all interviewees shared these concerns, tending towards a position that fundraising data did not represent a specialist category of data when held by internet platforms. Interviewees did not take into account the possibility of inferred data points.

"Facebook already knows so much about you - fundraising data should be the least of concerns"

**Director of Fundraising - Large Charity** 

<sup>1.</sup> https://www2.deloitte.com/insights/us/en/deloitte-review/issue-21/analytics-bad-data-quality.html

Data garnered by Facebook through donations and fundraising are governed by its overarching data policy, and payment information by specific EU and US privacy policies. The platform says that payment information is used and shared for defined purposes, such as making the payment and fulfilling regulatory obligations, which do not include advertising. The overarching data policy, which would presumably apply to other giving and fundraising information (such as the identity of causes), makes no specific reference to exclusion or inclusion of such data from advertising or other user-targeting applications.

The data policy states that certain information, including users' philosophical, religious and political views, health, ethnicity, or trade union membership is subject to special protection under EU law. The policy does not specify what these protections entail, nor whether information about charitable giving is included in this category.

Worryingly, during the course of our research, we discovered that discrimination using data based on interest in certain charitable activity on Facebook is already possible.

For example, it is possible to exclude people from advertising based on body parts or organs that have a strong association with diseases. Facebook's ads manager says that tens of millions of people have an interest in "Lung," "pancreas," and "vermiform appendix" - all of them were options for exclusionary targeting. Moreover, it is possible to exclude people from advertising based on NGOs strongly associated with health issues that Facebook users have an interest in.

The use of charitable giving data and charitable interest data for advertising may cause real and perceived harms to users, undermine their trust, and tarnish the reputation of charities, therefore:

Recommendation 1: Platforms should exclude charitable giving data and charitable interest data from user profiles as used to target advertising, and clearly indicate this. We believe that taken as a whole, fundraising data is likely to reflect protected characteristics, and as such should be explicitly excluded as part of data use policies.

# **SECTION 2** TRANSPARENCY

Interviewees expressed concern about the lack of transparency around the ways platforms selected, ranked and advertised their charities. Given its market share, Facebook was often used as the example by interviewees, though we believe that similar challenges can be found across the wider digital fundraising space. While Facebook complies with all of the Fundraising Regulator's guidance for fundraising platforms, charities raised concerns about the transparency of the Facebook Donate Platform.<sup>2</sup>

Communication between the platform and the causes was often cited as a point where improvements could be made. A number of interviewees identified a lack of reliable customer support systems for platforms' non-profit divisions.3 Charities we interviewed complained that access to customer service was difficult, having to go through backchannels with contacts they already had at a platform.

"We send through a request for help and it just goes straight into the ether[...]What we would really like is a more detailed roadmap about what Facebook wants to do with their platform."

### **Emma Dalby Bowler - Head of Digital Engagement - Mind**

There was also concern raised about how the order of charities was determined when creating a fundraiser. In many ways, this discussion mirrored contemporary concerns about algorithmic ranking practices in search results or product placement.

"I'd like more information about the charities being selected. Why not be able to order them by specific criteria?"

### **Director of Fundraising - Large Charity**

When a user initiates a fundraiser, they are invited to search for a charity. Before and during the entry of the search term (such as "dogs" or "cancer"), 10 charities are displayed. These results appear to be ranked by an algorithm drawing in part on the user's location, previous donation record, likes and those of their friends. It is not clear what other information the algorithm takes into account or how Facebook moderates it.

Next to each suggestion, the search function displays the names of a number of friends who have donated to that cause or liked its page. When donating to a charity on their page, under the heading "Who can see that you donated", Facebook claims that "Only [Charity Name] can see your donation". It is unclear, then why names of previous donors are available to friends.

Charities who find themselves on the top of the list will no doubt benefit from being increasingly featured in fundraisers. If that ranking algorithm were to change, charities could find a significant tool diminished or cut off entirely. Similar changes have disrupted campaigners and non profits in the past. In the wake of the major changes to the News Feed in 2018, aimed at combating 'fake news', numerous non profits saw significant traffic disruption which invariably affected their ability to reach out to the online community[3]

In England & Wales, charitable fundraising online cuts across a range of different areas, and therefore involves a number of regulators: the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), the Fundraising Regulator, and the Charity Commission. Some interviewees felt that it wasn't always obvious which organisation is responsible for regulating different aspects of online fundraising, particularly where new online fundraising practices arise.

"There is a need for us to ensure a coordinated approach to each area. It is sometimes not clear who is responsible for regulating which aspect."

Stephen Service - Policy Manager, **Fundraising Regulator** 

 $<sup>2. \</sup> https://www.fundraisingregulator.org.uk/more-from-us/resources/guidance-fundraising-platforms-5-focus-areas-donor-transparency\\ 3. \ https://www.wired.com/story/nonprofits-facebook-get-hacked-need-help/$ 

#### As such:

Recommendation 2: The process behind the ranking of charities on fundraisers is currently unclear to both charities and users. Platforms should collaborate with charities in order to create a fair ranking system, the process of which is transparent to charities.

Recommendation 3: Allowing more ways of viewing the charities would allow users to more quickly and easily discover causes they may be interested in. Facebook should allow users to filter charities by category when creating a fundraiser.

Recommendation 4: Many interviewees expressed frustration at the lack of back end support offered. Platforms should give more effective customer service support to charities using their charitable giving tools, including making more sources of data available and downloadable to them.

Recommendation 5: In order to anticipate changes once development is made more clear, charities should reflect the possibility of algorithmic change in risk assessments when forecasting fundraising.

Recommendation 6: Because of regulatory overlap, there is ambiguity as to who is responsible for regulating online fundraising. Regulators should collaborate to produce explicit guidelines for charities and platforms involved in charitable fundraising online.

# SECTION 3 CENTRALISATION

A wide array of industries have been impacted by the centralisation and monopolisation of online spaces. A growing dependence on major digital platforms came through strongly in the interviews.

There were mixed opinions about whether the rise of tools like Facebook Giving or Amazon Smile represented a positive change. Accessibility and ease of use, and the access to a vast number of potential donors or supporters, were widely recognised as being transformative to small and medium-sized charities. It has been called the "lowest effort philanthropy one can think of. In the realm of Facebook, doing good is so easy that it takes more effort not to do it."<sup>4</sup>

"With the limited size of our fundraising team, it's essentially been a completely passive form of fundraising for us. We haven't promoted it that much."

## Daniel Walsh - Income Generation Coordinator, LGBT Foundation

However, charities also noted a near requirement for their charity to participate in these spaces that often verged on dependence. One charity very clearly stated that they "could not afford not to" be on social media.

Interviewees reported a sense that big technology companies are gaining levels of increasing control over their income streams, there was concern that algorithm change could render their current method of fundraising inoperable. This is not unprecedented. In 2018, a change in one platform's newsfeed algorithm caused traffic to some websites to be severely cut.[1] This worry was most keenly reflected among smaller charities; larger organisations with established networks of supporters and a broader array of funding sources felt less at risk.

"Our funds will always be diverse. If one avenue of funds disappears, we will always

have others."

### **Director of Fundraising - Large charity**

Some interviewees expressed a fear that the drift to digital may disadvantage smaller charities, who struggle to pay for the technical expertise necessary to run the most sophisticated online fundraising campaigns.

Linked to this, interviewees felt that the relative visibility of charities and causes on platforms could lead to a situation in which the 'rich get richer', with algorithms prioritising visible causes that already receive significant online engagement. One interviewee likened the challenge to that facing the news industry: by prioritising by engagement, smaller, more niche players may well end up being excluded. There are useful parallels with the struggles faced by the local news industry.

When Facebook rolled out the functionality for charities to donate in the UK they made it possible to donate money directly on Facebook itself. Previously the charity would have to link off to a third party, such as JustGiving. Since then it's been possible for charities to continue to do both, though there are recent reports that the platform has removed the ability for charities to link to the third party.

Nevertheless, social media presents an unrivalled opportunity for smaller platforms to publicise their cause in a way that may have been almost impossible before the rise of digitisation. The rise of social media and engagement metrics has benefited some smaller, more niche players who can appeal to a base that can only reach critical mass because of the connectivity of the internet.

The elements of virality and organic content mean that social media may be a more uncertain game, but smaller charities can cut through on a more cost effective basis as opposed to traditional campaigns which have been more costly. In 2014, for example, The Ice Bucket Challenge took a relatively unknown condition, Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), to the forefront of the public consciousness through the spread of a viral trend.

On the whole, the picture was mixed: for many interviewees, the ease and access provided by major platforms was a major benefit, and future change would require adaptation that charities were willing to see as part and parcel of operating in this new landscape. As such:

Recommendation 7: Differentiating by size and nature of cause may help promote newer or more niche causes make successful use of online platforms. Platforms should have a section where smaller charities are featured.

# SECTION 3 ENGAGEMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

The practice of charities involving third parties in their fundraising efforts is long established. Specialist fundraising agencies, for example, have been around long before the shift to digital. This relationship has always involved sacrificing a degree of control over how charities engage with donors and supporters. The same issues exist with digital fundraising tools. Interviewees disagreed about whether social platforms represented a positive or negative change in their ability to engage with the public, both in the short and long term.

A number of interviewees noted that donations made through platforms often felt fleeting, and that building a long-term relationship with potential donors was a challenge online. Some charities that we interviewed reported a new campaign brought an initial spike in donations, but that sustaining interest and funds was extremely difficult. One of many possible reasons for this could be the absence of an ongoing relationship between donors and charities when they donate using these tools.

"We don't own the relationship with people. We don't have the ability to contact them directly."

## **Executive Director of Fundraising and Engagement - Large Charity**

Ease of donation may also inadvertently create 'giving fatigue'. Charities have noticed a saturation point particularly with 'birthday fundraisers' on Facebook where repeated requests for donations from the same person with the same pool of friends become less and less effective.

"It's like with people who run or cycle a lot. They can't keep entering charity events. People can't keep asking that same group of friends for money. You have to work a lot harder to find people."

### **Head of Digital - Large Charity**

When creating a 'fundraiser' on Facebook in particular, there are two possible ways to become involved. Setting up the fundraiser itself or being a donor once it exists. Secondary donors are the main source of income from Facebook Fundraisers, but the reasons for their donations can vary widely. The charities we spoke to felt that often the primary reason that people feel compelled to donate is due to their relationship with the friend who organised the fundraiser.

"You've donated because you're their friend, not because you particularly support the cause."

## Daniel Walsh - Income Generation Coordinator, LGBT Foundation

Charities report mixed success in engaging more widely with supporters. On a small scale, social media has allowed for a lot more organic engagement with supporters. Charities who deal with health conditions such as Pancreatic Cancer UK have 'survivors groups' where people affected by conditions can connect in a genuine way. However, many charities find it difficult for their message to cut through. One charity we spoke to said that a social media page with "hundreds and thousands" of likes, a post on their page only reaches "1-2%" of their audience.

"It's almost impossible to reach people with an organic post now. You're heavily reliant on their algorithm to get in front of people."

**Director of Digital - Large Charity** 

Ultimately, the extent to which any individual becomes involved with a charity, whether that be donating, volunteering, or spreading the word, depends on that individual's preference. The individual journey will be different for each person. All of the charities we spoke to agreed that social media tools have encouraged people to donate who might not have otherwise, and were broadly

positive about the power of social media platforms to broaden their audience. However, many of the charities that we spoke to identified areas before, during and after a fundraiser where there is an opportunity for more engagement with both donors and organisers. Below we use Facebook as an example.

### **BEFORE**

When setting up a fundraiser, the only opportunity for charities to convey their message is a prepopulated text box, explaining some information about their activities. Currently, the process revolves around the individual creating the fundraiser, as opposed to the charity itself. Facebook prompts you to 'tell your story', leaving little space for a charity to convey their message.

Recommendation 8: Facebook should allow more personalisation to fundraisers, allowing charities to add personalised engagement to donors.

### DURING

When charities receive a donation, it is not clear whether they have permission to contact donors further, stifling a potential avenue to build a relationship. Currently, charities receive the donor's first name, last name, donation amount, and email if provided.

Recommendation 9: Facebook should enhance their support structures, allowing charities to engage more easily with the platform.

### **AFTER**

There is currently no straightforward mechanism whereby charities can thank the organisers of a fundraiser. Some that we spoke to resorted to workaround measures, specifically hiring staff to manually go through and manually thank organisers. Others have employed the use of third party tools such as Givepanel.<sup>5</sup>

"We want to give tangible feedback to our supporters. Facebook doesn't let us do that at the moment."

**Director of Fundraising - Large Charity** 

Charities also flagged that the data produced from fundraisers is limited at the back end, limiting charities ability to analyse giving trends.

"The opaqueness seems intentional. I can get the advertising data that we use but not the fundraising data."

Recommendation 11: Facebook

**Director of Fundraising - Large Charity** 

Recommendation 10: Facebook should allow donors to opt in to additional contact from charities



# CONCLUSION

This report is based on a review of evidence and ten interviews with decision-makers and charity employees responsible for fundraising carried out in July 2019. Interviewees were approached from a range of charities selected to represent a range of concerns, organisation sizes and history of operation

One view held unanimously by interviewees in the charitable sector was that social media and digital fundraising platforms had brought about major changes to the landscape of charitable giving.

On the whole, charity executives interviewed presented mixed views on the impact the rise of digital fundraising had had on their charities. There was a clear sense that increased accessibility, visibility and a reduction to the barriers of entry to the use of online tools to raise money were positive changes. Social media can function as a powerful way to bring attention to a cause and to engage new supporters who may have previously been outside a charity's base.

Moving to the future, there are a range of risks and opportunities worth further scrutiny and effort. Chief among the risks are those of data use and a lack of transparency. Fundraising data should be treated with care given its sensitivity, and the prioritisation and competitiveness of smaller charities on centralised platforms demands transparency.

There was a concern among smaller charities that their use of fundraising tools could make them dependent on big tech companies, in the same way that much of the sector is for advertising. But there is also an opportunity for smaller charities to be promoted in a way that was not possible in the predigital age. Platforms should embrace this.

Above all, there is scope for platforms and charities to work together to improve the experience of fundraising online, and to grasp the opportunities presented by the medium. Adding functionality and clarity around how charities might work with donors in the longer term through these platforms is a clear opportunity, as are improvements to communication structures between funding platforms and causes. Further cooperation between the third sector and platforms should be encouraged, through which these tools might better ensure a long-term, sustainable and effective means for causes to win the support they need.

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