

Welcome to 2012 and Our New World

by the editors

This past
year marked the beginning
of Occupy Wall Street, which is emblematic
of a rising tide of citizen action unconnected to
formal institutions. Disturbing to some and exciting to
others, the ability of people to self-organize—and their
evident preference for it—is the overriding meaning we
take from this past year into the next. What does it
mean for institutions even in this sector.
Do we need to change, too?



AS WE HEAD INTO 2012, THERE IS A SENSE that the world has shifted in a powerful way.

The nature of this shift is still emerging, but we see the increasingly pointed demands for institutional accountability. People worldwide are less than happy about their treatment at the hands of the institutions they have supported in one manner or another, or about whose overall influence or operations they have simply had no say in determining. This has led people to break away from or otherwise call to account such institutions.

Occupy Wall Street, a loosely networked series of protests focused on crony capitalism and its progeny popped up around the country this fall—like a bunch of fractals of a generalized discontent about the structure of our economy and the relationship of the “one percent” with government. Encampments emerged overnight

both here and abroad. Associated with that movement were other occurrences—such as the group called Anonymous’s hacking into the Boston Police Department server after the BPD had arrested some protestors, to retrieve and publish the names of 1000 police personnel. (As far as we know there was no formal relationship between OWS and Anonymous.)

One grassroots effort quickly caused Bank of America to retract its brand-new \$5 monthly fee for debit cards, and another led to millions in savings being withdrawn from big banks and deposited into noncommercial, and often nonprofit, credit unions. At the time of writing this (December 5), these Bank Transfer “Day” transfers have driven up deposits in new credit union accounts by more than \$22.8 million each week since October 1. This story has a number of interesting components to it, including the fact that credit unions are run as cooperatives focused

on member well-being rather than profit. The transfers are a concrete expression of discontent signaling a will to reinsert personal choice making in the kinds of contracts we are willing to tolerate between we the people and the institutions in our lives.

In this issue Buzz Schmidt, founder and former CEO of GuideStar, discusses the need to develop constructs to hold private enterprise accountable for its contributions to various forms of the productive capital needed for societal progress in the next era. This aligns well with where we are all headed.

New energy and tools are emerging for a more broad-based, fluid movement for global sustainability—a movement for accountability and fairness largely devoid of any central institutional presence. Leadership is staying in loose rather than firm alliances—bound by common conviction rather than organization.

Other boundaries are shifting, too, including the wielding of large private charitable dollars and attached conditions to public institutions from the global to the local level. The new development is the willingness to exert specific control, as in the case of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and his \$100 million for the Newark schools, making visible the influence of the “one percent” in the public agenda setting.

Clearly, this new “class” rebellion and the further extension of billionaire influence through charitable dollars are two trends in potential conflict, but who is to know how the tension will be resolved?

Within this context, nonprofits do not get a pass on institutional disassociation, and later in these pages you will see an article on nonprofit stakeholder rebellions that run the gamut in terms of issues and categories of stakeholders. Some of these cases have been very interesting and well covered, such as the online donor revolt about a merger between Operation Smile and Smile Train. The donors petitioned the attorney general of New York to disapprove the merger, which was subsequently called off. Other cases involve staff, members, or constituents who feel that their contracts with a given nonprofit have been violated in some way. One of our favorites is

the case of two girl scouts who, upon discovering that palm oil plantations were displacing orangutans from their natural habitat, went on a campaign to get the Girl Scouts to stop using palm oil in their cookie recipes. We like that case because, along with any number of other stories we have been watching over the past year, it speaks to a new, strong wave of emerging young leaders complete with energy, analysis, and strong moral conviction.

Meanwhile, as these trends increase and develop, we are watching some of the leadership of the sector not quite getting the point about this new world whose rise we are privileged to watch, and perhaps even participate in, in the spirit of the moment. Here is a snippet from a *New York Times* article by Joichi Ito on innovation: “The Internet isn’t really a technology. It’s a belief system, a philosophy about the effectiveness of decentralized, bottom-up innovation. And it’s a philosophy that has begun to change how we think about creativity itself.”

NPQ would argue that we are headed into an era of enormous creativity and possibility, but that it may be a time of enormous tension and outright conflict, as the as yet loosely formed will evidenced in OWS becomes more insistent and others struggle to find their respective places. All of which puts us in mind of the poem “Escape,” by D. H. Lawrence.

When we get out of the glass bottles of our ego,
and when we escape like squirrels turning in the
cages of our personality
and get into the forest again,
we shall shiver with cold and fright
but things will happen to us
so that we don’t know ourselves.
Cool, unlying life will rush in,
and passion will make our bodies taut with power,
we shall stamp our feet with new power
and old things will fall down,
we shall laugh, and institutions will curl up like
burnt paper.

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