Torch: Behind a Business Intelligence Platform for Philanthropy and the Social Sector

Philip Rojc

Back when Richard Greenberg led the Fund for New Jersey, he learned firsthand how hard it can be for funders to stay on top of a sector that boasts over 1.5 million nonprofits. For funders and fundraisers alike, the ongoing flood of digital communications from potential partners is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, digital platforms let us engage in messaging and conversations with an unprecedented immediacy. But especially for organizations with small staffs, information overload can be a problem.

That's where solutions like Torch may be able to help. Launched three years ago by Greenberg and Michael Seiler, Torch is a business intelligence platform designed for the social sector. Drawing on information communicated in real time by foundations, nonprofits, advocacy organizations, NGOs, and even elected officials, Torch sorts and aggregates everything from social media posts to email, blogs, Youtube videos, and 990s.

"People think being a foundation president or program officer is cushy, but allocating money is hard because there are so many choices," Greenberg told me. Keeping track of who's who and who's doing what isn't easy. The platform is intended to fill that need, and similar needs from anyone who wants a better lay of the land on a particular issue area or set of organizations.

While Greenberg comes to Torch with plenty of experience in advocacy, fundraising, and grantmaking, co-founder Seiler's background is in tech. "I always had an interest in volunteering," Seiler said. After working as an engineer in the startup world, Seiler connected with Greenberg and saw a chance to solve a problem using a real-time analytic engagement system, this time supporting the nonprofit sector.

The platform Greenberg and Seiler have been building over the last few years offers its users a range of tools, including "watchlists" to keep tabs on communications from sets of organizations (like grantees) and real-time newsfeeds customized by specific issues, topics, and geographical regions. There are also email digests, "coalition builder" tools to help clients locate new ally organizations, and analytics that provide summaries of sentiment, common terms, and the like. "We wanted to create a real-time map of the nonprofit sector," Greenberg said. "A rough analogy would be the Bloomberg financial dashboard. People in philanthropy don't really have that."

To get Torch up and running, Greenberg and Seiler established an early partnership and reciprocal relationship with the Foundation Center (now Candid). "We've been working

with the Foundation Center almost like a data provider," Greenberg said. "We're feeding APIs to them, providing real-time info for them. They agree that having social media data searchable and organized by nonprofits is helpful, and they've been using Torch to power different parts of their product for about 18 months."

One of Torch's biggest philanthropic clients is the Carnegie Corporation of New York, a relationship that goes back about a year. "The more we work with them, the more they're integrating Torch into their day-to-day workflow. When they bring grantees into one newsfeed, they can get a feel for what grantees are talking about, what's important to them," Seiler said.

Their intended clientele may be largely nonprofit, but Greenberg and Seiler established Torch as a for-profit enterprise. Starting with their own funds and support from family and friends, they've grown the platform with money from a widening circle of investors. Plans going forward include a larger VC round focused on social impact investors, potentially including places like the Omidyar Network—philanthropic enterprises with origins in tech and a bullish attitude toward what tech can bring to the sector.

Initially, Greenberg and Seiler thought Torch would appeal primarily to nonprofits and foundations. But as the project advanced, corporate clients also came forward. As companies look to get more strategic about their social responsibility campaigns and philanthropic giving, they're using digital tools to galvanize employee giving and developing their own platforms to support workforce development and skills training.

In this arena, Torch is still relatively new and experimental. But it's clear that despite philanthropy's reputation for being somewhat slow on the uptake, tech tools are playing a growing role in how this sector operates. Crowdfunding is the latest example, while fundraisers have long used sites like Raiser's Edge. On the giving side, foundations are increasingly relying on sophisticated grant management platforms like Fluxx.

One big question is whether new tools will help democratize giving, making it more accessible to new demographics or enabling funders to do a better job of listening to grantees. It's still too early to predict what the full effects of the digital revolution will be for philanthropy, but with tools like Torch at their disposal, funders and nonprofits alike are able to better able to navigate a complicated and noisy social sector.

April 06, 2019