In the Fund-Raising Game, Blogs Cut Both Ways

By NOAM COHEN and JAMES FREED

IN the world of animal rights’ charities, a certain phrase has been fund-raising gold lately — “Michael Vick’s dogs.”

When Mr. Vick, the star quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, pleaded guilty to planning an interstate dogfighting ring, he was singled out for protests and was shunned by the National Football League. But for charities like the Humane Society of the United States, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Mr. Vick’s long-suffering pit bulls, freed from gladiator duty, became the faces to show the public for fund-raising.

The Agitator, one of many new blogs tracking philanthropy in America, relishes analyzing such on-the-fly marketing, and in September one contributor, Adam Church, examined how charities capitalized on the Vick news. He watched how the three charities behaved after being given donations in the wake of Mr. Vick’s fiasco.

He concluded in his blog post that while the Humane Society did the best job keeping its donors informed as the case developed via e-mail, PETA was the most persistent in asking for donations. Only the A.S.P.C.A., he wrote, passed up the opportunity to fund-raise aggressively online.

Soon after his posting appeared, though, an anonymous e-mailer responded that Mr. Church, who works for a fund-raising consultant group, had been unfair to the A.S.P.C.A. It didn’t send out fund-raising material, the e-mailer wrote, because it was the only organization directly involved in the case and thus was prohibited from fund-raising or even speaking about the case by the United States Attorney’s office in charge of the prosecution. (The A.S.P.C.A. said in an e-mail message that it never sought the government’s permission because it would never have considered linking the case to a fund-raising appeal.)

The anonymous e-mail message also pointed out that while the Humane Society and PETA did a good job seizing the moment, none of the money they raised actually went to help the pit bulls.

For Roger Craver and Tom Belford, two fund-raising consultants who founded the Agitator, the controversy around the Vick case illustrated the powers and pitfalls of charity-focused blogging, a small but influential factor in the world of philanthropy.

As a rule, they are uncomfortable about publishing an anonymous post, Mr. Belford said. But the issues seemed important enough to warrant publishing, he said, and seeking responses from the charities involved.

And the way things unfolded showed that even a relatively obscure blog could help hold multimillion-dollar charities accountable. In the end, all three organizations responded to the Agitator to defend their conduct, and the A.S.P.C.A. even distanced itself from the e-mail that made its case so effectively.

Philanthropy has been late to the game of blogging, hardly a surprise in a field that has operated on personal
relationships and reputations earned over decades. But just as charities have learned in recent years to use e-mail blasts to solicit support, their executives are getting used to a digital world in which there are fewer secrets than in the past.

According to The Chronicle of Philanthropy, the number of blogs on philanthropic issues that the journal follows has soared to 160 from 100 in March. As the number of blogs has grown, so has the range of topics they cover: what began as material geared to industry insiders can be used by donors researching the performance of charities.

As the Vick debate on the Agitator blog shows, unfiltered access to an audience has the potential to put charities under greater scrutiny. “This hasn’t happened regularly yet because blogs about philanthropy are still relatively new, and the amount of serious discourse isn’t yet at the level where it will be in the near future,” said Peter Panepento, a senior reporter at The Chronicle and a contributor to its Give and Take blog. “But as blogs become more accepted and the number of people sharing fact and opinion in these venues increases, so, too, will the level of debate.”

What donors expect from blogs — and from charities’ Web sites for that matter — reflects the reasons they make charitable contributions in the first place, bloggers said. Is it to “do good” or to “feel good”? Those who want to do good seem to want to read critical assessments of charities and find out what percentage of a donation goes to help the cause; those who want to feel good can use the Internet to stay informed about a charity’s good works.

Holden Karnofsky, executive director of GiveWell, an organization that advises donors, said that blogging was one aspect of an online strategy to solidify that relationship between charities and donors. “I think it makes a huge difference in an almost entirely positive way,” said Mr. Karnofsky, who contributes to the GiveWell blog. “If we put everything out there, the positive along with the negative, the question is always, ‘Will this scare people away or bring more in?’ I believe that people are underestimating how much the truth can bring more donors in.”

Other bloggers, like Jack B. Siegel, a lawyer, consultant and author who operates the Charity Governance blog, say they doubt that donors will latch onto ideological discussions of insiders and instead will be content to stay on the sidelines. “I really have trouble believing that the average donor who is giving $20 to a charity is going to go to GuideStar or read 20 blogs before they write that check,” Mr. Siegel said.

But Philip B. Cubeta, a financial executive who writes the blog Gift Hub, where he assumes the role of a pro bono “Morals Tutor to America’s Wealthiest Families,” said that blogs had become a vital way for people to communicate, and that philanthropy was no exception.

“The new givers, the social-venture types who come to giving from succeeding in their 30s or 40s as an entrepreneur, are at ease in the blogosphere,” he wrote in an e-mail message. “Some established donors may indeed be put off by irreverent blogging. Others may find it refreshing.”

One might expect Trent Stamp, president of Charity Navigator, a Web site that rates the efficiency of charities based on financial statements filed with the government, to be a true believer in blogs as watchdogs. Yet he said he was concerned about the Internet’s potential to traffic in innuendo and gossip.

“Anonymous commentators are cowards,” Mr. Stamp wrote in a recent e-mail message. “If you’re willing to
have your work published, you should be willing to put your name on it. The explosion of anonymous commentators in the nonprofit world shows the immaturity of the sector.”

Still, he said, he had reason to be optimistic. “I think good blogs, written by honest people with insider access, empower donors to learn more about the groups they’re considering,” Mr. Stamp said. “Information is power, and good blogs empower donors. I think good blogs scare the hell out of lousy charities, because they understand that they serve as a clearinghouse for truth and transparency.”

Mr. Craver, a founder of the Agitator blog, said that the candid commentary proliferating online was a better fit for a new generation of donors.

Until recently, he said, most charities were supported by the World War II generation. “Today, the baby boomer generation is the new generation of donors,” Mr. Craver said. The older generation was “blindly loyal to organizations: ‘Tell me what you want and I’ll do it.’ The baby boomers are the show-me generation, meaning ‘let me see results, transparency and accountability.’”