

■ NAATW and TIAA: Grassroots Sharing on A.A. and Technology

This article is the second of three in a Box 4-5-9 series on the technology that is changing the way Alcoholics Anonymous communicates to suffering alcoholics and interacts with its members.

“Imagine,” says Lew G., a co-founder of the online forum Technology in A.A. (TIAA), “an international society with two million members with, conceivably, as many as 10,000 web presences that don’t coordinate with each other, that sometimes provide conflicting information, that are slow to update and that are often dependent on someone’s niece or brother-in-law to fix when they get broken.”

What you’ve imagined, of course, is Alcoholics Anonymous, which has been represented by a hodgepodge of different websites for groups, districts, areas and intergroup/central offices. While this has worked, more or less, for a while — “and in a certain sense, is in accordance with A.A. and our Tradition of group autonomy,” Lew says — there have been ongoing problems in terms of people showing up at the wrong places and the wrong times for meetings in new places, or finding reliable contacts when they needed another alcoholic to speak to. Lois L., an administrator on the TIAA online forum and a professional digital strategist and user experience (UX) consultant who advises G.S.O., echoes this: “Someone can create a website and then go out and drink, or just disappear, and there’s no way to fix or update it because of credentials and password issues. Sometimes these are sites containing important archive collections that go dark and what’s on them is lost.”

It’s long been apparent to a number of A.A. members, both with and without tech backgrounds, that there has to be a way to share technology within Alcoholics Anonymous so that every new webmaster doesn’t have to reinvent the wheel and, even more importantly, so that fresh ideas on how to use tech to spread the message to suffering alcoholics can come bubbling to the surface.

One answer came in August of 2014, which saw the very first meeting of the National A.A. Technology Workshop (NAATW). NAATW was the brainchild of Brouck H. and Blaine B., both of whom work in the tech industry and have advised the General Service Office on technology. Brouck consulted with G.S.O. to fix problems with the e-reader app, released in 2012. The team



he put together included Blaine. Their work made them realize how much needed to be done as A.A. inevitably, but slowly, moved forward into a technological age. And so they began giving workshop forums on their own, both in the U.S. and in Canada, many of them to intergroup office managers — intergroup/central offices being on the front line of communicating with members and active alcoholics seeking help.

“One of the issues that was important,” Brouck says, “is that we presented tech issues from the perspective of A.A. members — not outside vendors. In talking to people, we understood what they were up against and why it was so difficult to get answers to some of the technological questions they had. We realized that there had to be more communication, more sharing, so we thought, How do we organize this and make it happen?”

The answer was NAATW, which they based on the model of the National A.A. Archives Workshop (NAAAW). Attendees at that first St. Louis Workshop — such as Lois L., who became an NAATW steering committee member — spoke to the fact that there was no general role in A.A. for focusing on technology. They also addressed the concern that service in tech would require special knowledge, leaving A.A. dependent on a cadre of expert technologists — a situation that would run counter to the spirit of rotation, a central principle of the NAATW. Published on their website, (<https://naatw.org/12-statements-of-technology/>) NAATW’s “12 Statements of Technology” begin with implementing

technology “where it supports our primary purpose,” making an informed group conscience “a part of technology decision making,” and using technology “to make information available, not limit it.”

NAATW has continued to do just that as it grows. Its latest workshop was held in Bowling Green, Kentucky, in September 2019, and it will host a hospitality suite at the International Convention in Detroit next summer. “When it comes to spreading the message about how to use tech,” Brouck says, “we are agnostic about platforms. The real issues are: Is it stable? Can you afford it? Is support available? And is it adaptable without writing your own code? That’s the fundamental outline of it for most A.A. entities.”

Aiding in this work of spreading the message about technology are Lew G. and his TIAA co-founder Keith D., who has spent a career working in IT and was a Panel 67 delegate for Area 65 in Northeast Texas. The TIAA forum — intended expressly for both technical and non-technical members — began out of a need to keep ideas percolating all year-round between NAATW conferences in order to share questions and solutions on everything from how to support new websites to finding the best answering service for your district. It now has more than 700 members and, as of August 1, a board of directors, president, secretary, treasurer and 501c3 nonprofit status. Interested members can sign up at tiaa-forum.org.

“What’s exciting is to see new members come on and get some of the answers they need,” Lew says. “I’d like to expand our How-to sections to give incoming members easier access to basic information they need to create a website. We’ve had subgroups go off and do actual development and code for the forum and for A.A. as a whole.” A recent visit to the “Forum” page revealed substantive threads on a broad range of subject matter — everything from archiving your A.A. archives website to the best apps for recording speakers to changing your website’s domain name system settings. Adds Lew, “One of the biggest successes for us has been the Meeting Finder app [See *Box 4-5-9*, Fall ’19], whose developer Josh R. received support and feedback from the forum and from NAATW. Josh came out of this community. Hopefully, the next great app or web development can arise out of some email interchange here or members having coffee somewhere.”

Clement C., staff member on the Communication Services assignment at the General Service Office, is a TIAA forum member and regularly attends NAATW forums, as does Julie Gonzalez (nonalcoholic), Communication Services staff assistant. He emphasizes that he and Julie don’t participate in the workshops or on the forum as official voices of G.S.O. “There is no official connection, but we listen.” In the first NAATW conference he attended, Clement noted that G.S.O. was in the process of drafting a request for proposal (RFP)

for the new G.S.O. website that is currently in development, adding, “Before the weekend was over, I had a seven-page report with suggestions on how to craft it.” As A.A. continues with its YouTube channel, the Meeting Finder app, the new website and any number of forthcoming projects, Clement says, “There have been people who came out of NAATW/TIAA helping every step of the way.”

“The thing that was exciting to me at the NAATW forum [in Bowling Green],” Julie says, “was people’s reactions to solutions they are hearing. That look of relief that we can make this work. People get fired up and excited. They got emotional during a session on how people are using video-conference software to hold remote meetings.” And both Lois and Brouck point to simultaneous phone-translating software that can allow meetings to be held remotely in a host of different languages, with anonymity intact, as among a number of innovations that will help spread the word of A.A. in the not-too-distant future.

In practice, how will the growth of tech work in A.A.? Blaine B., co-founder of NAATW, sounds a cautionary note: “The more we make this about technical expertise, the more it scares people off. It’s regular A.A. service work. People always say, ‘I’m not very technical,’ but for the most part, that’s not what this is. Much of what we communicate is very low tech, stuff that people can do from simple little recipes, as it were. So, it’s a mistake to attach some kind of mystique around it that makes it seem unapproachable or more difficult than it is.”

Keith D., now a member of the NAATW steering committee, takes a nuanced view of how tech can develop within A.A. principles. “Showing someone on a how-to TIAA board steps to build a website in WordPress is not that hard. If you can use a computer fairly well, you can do it. Most webmasters in this sense, with a little help, can rotate in and out of positions on a regular basis. But there are more technical service jobs where someone with IT expertise is needed. Sometimes that person, like certain archivists, may be in the job for years. And sometimes districts may need to pay people for specialized expertise. None of this is new.”

In the end, Keith feels, “The point is that we are going in the right direction or at least the conversation is going in the right direction. I love A.A. and it has changed my life. *The Language of the Heart* is a book I read a lot, and through it I’ve gotten pretty familiar with Bill W.’s viewpoint. I’m willing to bet if he were alive today, he’d say, ‘Oh my God, let’s see how we can use this to make A.A. more effective.’ We may screw up, and we’re going to fall on our faces, just like we do during our recoveries. But then we use that experience to get better.”

The 2020 NAATW will be held in Greater Seattle. For more information and to sign up for the NAATW newsletter, visit naatw.org.