BARNABY WOODS GROUP
Media & Strategic Communications

Report on the Implementation and Success of the NCUC Training Program for Writing Policy and Public Comment – Jim Trengrove May 10, 2018

In September, 2017, the Non-Commercial Users Constituency (NCUC) secured funding to have developed for its membership a pilot program to train members how to write effective policy and public comment. The purpose of the program was to encourage and develop greater participation of NCUC members in ICANN's Policy Development Process (PDP). I was approached by ICANN's Vice President of Communications to design the program and I did so working primarily through ICANN's Head of Asia-Pacific Communications and ICANN supporting staff, as well as in coordination with the NCUC Chair.

The design of the program included the following elements:

- Pre-Training Survey
- Instructional Webinar
- Face-to-Face Training at ICANN 61 in Puerto Rico
- Post-Training Webinar

Additional plans were made to create a training video from the face-to-face training to be included as part of the **ICANN Learn** curriculum.

Pre-Training Survey: A survey was created in coordination with the NCUC Chair, designed to gather information on the training needs of NCUC members. The questions were aimed at achieving baseline information on members' particular interests, desired areas of concentration, members' strengths and weaknesses and other issues pertinent to NCUC. The survey was first distributed to NCUC members in late February with a request that members submit their responses by March 1. The survey was distributed again on March 4 to attract greater participation and to provide a more informed survey. In all, eighteen members completed the survey before the

face-to-face training in Puerto Rico. The survey results were provided to the NCUC Chair.

Among the survey results:

- 78% of respondents either "somewhat" or "very much enjoyed" writing.
- 50% "very much" considered themselves to be good writers while 33% responded "somewhat". 11% responded "not at all."
- More than half the respondents (56%) said 75% or more of their policy writing was done in English while a solid 17% said little or none of their writing was in English.
- 80% of the respondents did say they were "very" comfortable communicating in English, both writing and speaking.
- 60% said they could "easily" generate words and ideas on issues that interest them. That percentage fell to 28% on issues in which they do not have much interest.
- 83% said they were either "very" or "somewhat" experienced collaborating with others writing a policy paper.

Instructional Webinar: On February 21st, I conducted a one-hour webinar with NCUC members participating online from around the world. A second webinar was conducted on February 23rd with the content revised slightly from the first webinar after consultation with the NCUC Chair. The webinar was designed to introduce to the participants a series of "best practices" for their use in the development of policy and public comment writing. Those practices were chosen and tailored from among a dozen online writing programs and publications I researched, from my 40 years of writing experience as a journalist and from my six years experience writing as Senior Director of Communications for ICANN.

Those "best practices" focused specifically on:

- Planning Your Comment
- Structuring Your Comment
- Writing Your Comment

For the actual writing of the comment, I suggested a 5-paragraph template designed to ensure the writer accomplishes his or her desired goals:

1. Introduce yourself and clearly state the purpose of your comment.
2. Include supporting evidence and your unique qualifications to comment.
3. Connect your constituents and how the policy would affect them.
4. Propose alternative solutions and a Plan of Action.
5. Summarize your comment and urge action.

Face-to-Face Training at ICANN 61: The NCUC invited a select group of its members attending ICANN 61 to participate in the face-to-face training; twelve members in all with several members participating online. The training included a 6 ½ hour session and a 1½ hour session held on consecutive says, March 11th & 12th. The training began with a review and discussion of those instructional "best practices" offered during the webinar. Participants considered the effectiveness of those practices as they applied to their own individual work and interests. Given the diverse nature of those interests and of NCUC membership overall, these discussions were robust and informative.

I chose two archived public comments, in particular, to launch a series of small group writing exercises:

- a lengthy 2009 NCUC Letter to ICANN Board of Directors & CEO on NCSG Charter Issue
- a thorough 2018 public comment on ICANN's draft Operating Plan and Budget for the fiscal year 2019

For the first small group exercise, participants were asked to determine the essence of the 2009 letter and rewrite it; consolidating the message and softening the tone without diluting its impact.

For the second small group exercise, participants were asked to chose one of more than a dozen concerns raised in the 2018 public comment and craft a comment focused on one specific issue.

The 6½ hour session gave participants the time needed to review, discuss and redesign the archived comments. The groups then took turns presenting their work and commenting on the work of the others.

The final writing exercise was presented as overnight "homework" to be completed before the 1½ hour session the next day. It instructed them to write a one-page public comment on any issue or concern of their choice. Their work was presented during that second session and we had time to review some but not all of their work.

Throughout the three writing exercises, I urged participants to be guided by the 5-paragraph template as much as possible to plan, structure and complete their writing.

Post-Training Webinar: The final element of the NCUC training was a 75-minute webinar I conducted on April 20th. During the webinar, we briefly reviewed the "best practices" I had developed for the curriculum, such as how best to plan and structure your writing. We also reviewed the 5-paragraph template designed to make the task of having to write a public comment less imposing.

I, then, shared what I had learned from the NCUC training through the feedback I received through both the series of webinars and the face-to-face training.

- English, as a second language to many of the participants, clearly is an obstacle to public comment writing and, therefore, an obstacle to participating in ICANN's policy development process. Yet, no one seemed deterred by that obstacle. The consensus was that the continued practice of writing in English, and communicating in general in English, would eventually ease the task. The breakthrough would come once the writer stopped writing in his or her native language and then translating it into English. Once the writer becomes comfortable thinking in English, then the structure and actual writing should easily follow.
- The 5-paragrah template was unanimously embraced by the participants during the face-to-face training. During their concluding

comments at the end of Day 2, several said the template allowed them to inject thoughts and concerns, facts and alternate courses of action, all into a format that ensured their comment would "click all the boxes" and achieve its goal.

- The "elevator pitch" idea I had introduced, the trick of being able to communicate your concerns, solutions and actions during the time it takes your elevator to travel from the ground floor to the top, also was well received. We took that concept a step further during the face-to-face training as I placed limits on the time available for participants to write their comments, and limits on the length of those comments – one page, if possible. The practice is designed to encourage brief, direct and convincing comments with emphasis on narrowing your comment to a specific issue, and knowing that issue well enough to converse easily about it. During the Post-Training Webinar, I responded to questions about the limitations of a one-page comment by reassuring "penholders" that the one-page concept is simply a guideline with ample flexibility determined by the task at hand. The bottom line, however, is that it is more effective and expedient to write less; limiting yourself to core issues and arguments, than it is to write too much and having to edit out extraneous information.

- This first NCUC training program received unanimous support from the face-to-face participants as well as from many of those who attended the webinars. In fact, several participants said the program should be mandatory for NCUC members. One suggested that the program should be required for members but only after their first or second ICANN meeting, once members have established their bearings within the ICANN Community.

Finally, from a personal level, let me say how much I enjoyed the challenge of designing this pilot program and working with all of the NCUC participants. Their enthusiasm showed a willingness, a desire, in fact, to collaborate on public comments and policy development. Their efforts, energy and eagerness to improve their writing skills also revealed the solid leadership skills they posses. They demonstrated to me that the future of the NCUC is in very good hands.