

Social Media Effectiveness for Public Engagement: An Example of Small Nonprofits

by Youyang Hou and Cliff Lampe

In order for small organizations to fully take advantage of the benefits of social media as a successful method of public engagement, they must think in nuances directly related to their circumstances. This study provides some rich examples.

Editors' note: This article was excerpted from a research paper looking at the constraints and foci of social media practice in twenty-six small environmental organizations. We thought that the discussion of the kinds of conversations the nonprofits had with the various stakeholders on multiple social media platforms was thoughtful and informative with respect to how the new communications environment is evolving. The paper was originally published by ACM, in May 2015. It has been abridged and adapted with permission.

WHEN SMALL ACTIVIST NONPROFITS work with social media, they are faced with any number of considerations, including the ways that various constituencies wish to communicate; what those communications might produce in terms of engagement, social action, or donations; how widely used and well suited various platforms of social media are for the task at hand; and how well staff and volunteers understand each medium. On top of that, the basic control mechanisms of the organization may present barriers: Are staff and volunteers trusted as spokespeople

as long as their work conforms to a central design or are the number of spokespeople and the message more tightly controlled? The good news is that some small nonprofits are unflaggingly inventive and agile. This article, excerpted from a larger study, describes how twenty-six small environmental groups approached their social media work in the midst of such complexity.

The nonprofits we studied work with a diverse group of stakeholders via social media sites, had at the time an average of fifteen staff members, and fall into three general categories: affiliate and university (six of the nonprofits), network and

policy (eleven of the nonprofits), and community (twelve of the nonprofits). Affiliate and university organizations are programs associated with larger governmental agencies or universities. Network and policy organizations primarily advocate for policy change surrounding environmental issues on a statewide or regional level. Community organizations are often dedicated to their local waterway(s) and organize at a community level.

The interaction with different stakeholders segmented based on the characteristics of social media and the popularity of social media among

the various stakeholder groups, which include the following:

Nonprofit members. Nonprofit members are local citizens who show an interest in the organization's cause and sign up for membership, which usually includes sharing their contact information with the nonprofit. Membership size among the organizations we examined ranged from four hundred and fifty to seventeen thousand, and members were the most reliable sources of financial support and event participation. As a consequence, one of the most vital motivations for using social media was to expand membership. For daily communication, however, the nonprofits mainly used e-mail and newsletters to communicate directly with members.

Volunteers. Social media sites enabled the nonprofits to post information about volunteer recruitment and give recognition and thanks to volunteers who helped with previous events or activities. In addition, the organizations frequently posted photos of volunteer activities on Flickr, Instagram, and in Facebook albums, and shared these images via social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter.

Funders. The nonprofits used social networking sites to engage with funders by posting donation information and giving recognition and thanks to donors. Nevertheless, as financial donors are usually older adults who are relatively less active on social media sites, the organizations felt that the most effective way to contact and engage with funders was still via traditional communication channels such as e-mail lists and face-to-face meetings.

Other organizations. A third of the nonprofits frequently used social media to strengthen existing partnerships with other organizations by cross-promoting one another on social media—for example, liking each other's content,

reposting each other's posts, promoting each other's events, sharing news and tools from each other's sites, and recognizing and praising each other's work. The nonprofits saw this as a way to “scratch each other's backs,” support and build relationships with other organizations, get updated about each other's work progress, and, especially, “double the poll of viewers” and expand the follower influence on social media sites. These nonprofits appeared to be primarily connected to other organizations, and didn't reach out much to the general public.

Reporters. Building a positive relationship with reporters and media has long been an important outreach and communication goal for nonprofits, as reporters can help to attract press attention and disseminate information. Twitter was perceived as the primary platform for media reporters to reach out to nonprofits. Reporters frequently use Twitter features such as retweet, favorite, and @ to interact with nonprofits, pick up their tweets as news sources, or ask questions on Twitter, which greatly increased the nonprofits' online influence. In addition, the nonprofits' social media point persons proactively interacted with reporters in order to strengthen the relationship. As one interviewee explained, one might use the nonprofit's social media to “post [reporters'] work, credit

their work, and try to generate discussions with the individual reporters.”

Diverse Stakeholders and Engagement Goals: Information, Community, and Action

The work of these small nonprofits over multiple social media sites to engage with a variety of stakeholders fell into three engagement goals:

- Disseminate information about their causes and the organization;
- Build community and engage with different stakeholders; and
- Mobilize actions like donation and volunteer work.

Disseminating Information

The nonprofits shared a huge amount of information regarding environmental issues and organizational updates via a variety of social media sites, in order to increase awareness of their organization and its mission. A content analysis (see Table 1, below) of nonprofits' Facebook and Twitter pages illustrates that about half of their social media posts were related to an information goal: news and updates of their website and organization; educational resources and environmental tools; and multimedia content such as photos or videos.

The nonprofits commonly used multiple social media sites together to support

Table 1. Content Analysis of Nonprofits' Facebook and Twitter

Engagement goals	Code type	Facebook (25 nonprofits)	Twitter (23 nonprofits)
Information	News and updates	218 (29.0%)	171 (24.8%)
	Education, tools	113 (15.1%)	84 (12.2%)
	Media	47 (6.2%)	29 (4.2%)
Community	Other organization	29 (3.8%)	73 (10.6%)
	Conversation	24 (3.2%)	54 (7.8%)
	Giving recognition and thanks	44 (5.8%)	59 (8.6%)
	Live posting	37 (4.9%)	46 (6.7%)
Action	Event	162 (21.6%)	74 (10.7%)
	Call for action	78 (10.4%)	100 (14.5%)

the information engagement goal. They frequently shared updates from their websites and blogs, tutorials or educational videos from YouTube, and photos from Flickr or Instagram. They also used blogs to aggregate information from the social networking sites and provide longer-form content on interesting topics:

The features that primarily go into the blog site actually originate on the day-to-day news items that I tweet out. And then I compile those in the weekly blog summary under various headings, such as agriculture or water quality or biodiversity. So it's an aggregate. If there are what I see as more significant issues, then I'll do a separate article about those significant breaking issues and then sometimes summarize those in a paragraph or two within the weekly issue.¹

Multimedia content was also a popular strategy among the nonprofits. Most participants told us that the most effective strategy for soliciting shares and comments was to post appealing photographs, usually containing cute animals or beautiful nature scenes. The nonprofits frequently posted such media content on Flickr, Pinterest, and/or Instagram, and shared through social networking sites. Participants felt that the practice helped to provide "a better entry point" for the public to learn more about nonprofits.

Building Community

While the purpose of the first engagement goal is to disseminate information, another set of social media practices involves building stronger ties with existing stakeholders and local communities. Table 1 describes the types of community posts tied to this goal: interaction with other organizations, conversations with

the public, giving recognition and thanks, and live posting about volunteer events. The nonprofits proactively posted questions and discussion topics to prompt interaction and conversations with their audience. One participant described her organization's experience of posting questions online, like this:

We ask a question, and when they respond, we can become close to them through being actively engaged with what they're saying. You have to build up to a point where people feel almost safe, and that it's going to be all right if they're wrong.

Many of the nonprofits found that hashtags on Twitter were particularly helpful for initiating such discussion, as the hashtag format "speaks in ways a sentence can't." Nevertheless, many also said that despite using these strategies in

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their social media, their followers were still not actively participating in the conversations.

Lastly, the nonprofits frequently posted photos related to their work and such occasions as conferences or volunteer events to demonstrate their endeavors and accomplishments. In some cases, they made use of the real-time, live properties of Twitter and Facebook by providing live postings of events, as the following description of using social media during a court hearing demonstrates:

There were very few people who could take time off during the day to sit and listen to this court hearing, even though everybody was extremely interested in the outcome of this debate and what the judge was going to say. So I was able to live-tweet that court hearing. The Twitter stream that I was posting got a gigantic spike of followers, and people were really tuning in.

Mobilizing Actions

For most nonprofits, the ultimate goal of social media use was to mobilize an audience by providing enough information and building a sufficient sense of community to spur people into potential actions, such as becoming a volunteer member, donating money, or signing a petition:

The bigger question becomes, are they going to sign the letter to Congress or are they going to sign the letter to the Wisconsin legislature when there's an issue going on that they can take action on? Or are they more of just a casual supporter? And that's something we're trying to get a handle on.

In our content analysis, we also found that the nonprofits frequently posted about actionable items: event information, fundraising, advocacy, social media

campaigns, or direct calls for action (see Table 1). But while the nonprofits tried to mobilize actions through social media sites, they typically became disappointed with the inability of such sites to transform online engagement into real action, whether in the form of attending an event or providing financial support—particularly when the nonprofit had directly asked for such actions. They noted that “liking a Facebook page is not an engagement,” and felt it did not lead to action outside the site. They thought the problem was that the social media audience was not “tuned to hear the message” and seemed to lack the motivation to take real actions:

We invited people to participate on social media. They loved the pictures and the quotes that people were sending in about the river. But we didn't get a single person to print out the form and put a check with it and send it to us from any of the platforms we used electronically.

Instead of social media sites, many of the nonprofits mentioned that traditional communication tools like e-mail lists or even face-to-face interactions were still more effective in mobilizing people—especially previous volunteers and donors—into actions like fundraising and signing a petition. They reported usually getting pretty good results with such traditional calls. A participant described one example when his organization asked people for an advocacy action:

More recently, we did ask people to call their local congressmen about the Water Resources Development Act. I was sort of surprised [by] the e-mails I got. People were forwarding to me the responses they got from the congressmen when they did call.

Evaluating Social Media Effectiveness: A Mismatch with Real Engagement

One challenge for small nonprofits appears to be defining and measuring the success of social media sites in terms of public engagement. The nonprofits paid close attention to basic metrics of their social media sites like numbers of followers, shares and likes, and growth trends. These metrics reflected the size of audiences and how much interaction occurred on their social media sites, and thus spoke to the information and community goals of public engagement:

I think people like some of the news stories that we post, and if we post something fun like, “We just got a million-dollar grant from the EPA,” a lot of people tend to like those things. Sort of a “Yay. Congratulations.” The Like button's like a virtual high five.

Many participants also noted that they had been using social media analytical tools like Facebook Insights, Klout, and Urchin to further track the demographics and behaviors of visitors to social media sites. However, they generally did not have formalized routines or strategies for using these tools, and only looked at anecdotal information rather than tracking numbers systematically. Participants repeatedly told us that although such analytical tools provide numerous metrics, they were too complicated to interpret:

Facebook is crazy. They measure every little click that anybody does. But it's hard for me to capture that information and present it to our board members to explain whether the performance of our social media is improving or needs boosting.

Furthermore, participants noted that the analytical tools gave them little

information about their performance in terms of achieving the action goal. They had no idea whether social media visitors were being effectively transformed into highly engaged members or donors. Even if they were succeeding in this goal, there was no way for them to compare the list of social media visits with their lists of volunteers, members, or donors. Without having clear methods in place to match these sets of information, they felt it was extremely difficult to further engage with their audiences. For instance, a participant noted that it was hard for her organization to compare its Facebook audience with its existing membership list, and that the data from Facebook itself was not particularly useful:

For this post, the people that like the thing—twenty people out of the three hundred and twenty-nine likers we have here—I don't know

who they are. They don't show up on e-mail lists. I know that they're mostly local, which is good, because that means that they saw us somewhere, or picked up one of our bookmarks somewhere, and liked the page. But we need to figure out how to connect these people to our organization. They're disconnected from other parts of communication that you have.

The Organizational Context of Small Nonprofits' Social Media Use

We have observed that small nonprofits seek to achieve a complex assemblage of public engagement goals with different stakeholders. However, distributed coordination with multiple sites and a diverse and fluid workforce; time, funding, and expertise constraints; and organizational policy all factored into decisions about which social media to

use and how social media sites were used by these small nonprofits for public engagement.

"All Hands on Deck" for Social Media Management

In the small environmental nonprofits, there was usually a shortage of labor for social media management. Participants noted that they commonly "wear a lot of hats" and were responsible for a variety of communication and public relations tasks. Social media management work, though important, was only one small component on the long list of such tasks. As a result, most of the nonprofits did not have one person wholly dedicated to social media management but instead distributed the responsibility across a group of staff members.

This "all-hands-on-deck" approach to social media management followed several different patterns. The first



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mode was that each staff member would manage one official social media page with which he or she was familiar. The challenge, as a result, was to coordinate among different social media pages.

In the second mode, multiple staff members had administrative access to the official social media page(s), and anyone could edit and maintain the sites' content. When multiple people were working collaboratively on these sites, the challenge became how to coordinate among people and conduct quality control. Nevertheless, most organizations did not have a rigorous policy about coordination and quality control; instead, staff members just had to trust that each person would behave responsibly when posting something:

We don't have a process of running something by the whole team, because that's too slow. We just have to trust each other's judgment, and each of us does it. If there's something that I do have a question about, it's easy for me to run it by somebody if I want, but it's not required.

In the third mode, the nonprofits encouraged certain staff members (such as outreach specialists) to create a personal account separate from the official account—usually on Twitter—to post about their work, expertise, and experiences related to the organization's causes. The official account and the specialist accounts frequently reposted each other's content and attracted their own audience, which expanded the overall organization's influence “like a big web.” This strategy was also perceived as an effective way to make the organization feel more real and accessible:

So it does allow you to peek behind the curtain of our organization, kind of humanize people. But not

in a frivolous way, and then I think that builds the interest that we naturally have. We're just naturally curious about other people.

In addition to the full-time staff, the nonprofits often relied on their temporary workforce (such as interns or volunteers) to manage their social media sites. These short-term workers were temporary, their schedules frequently changed, and their work discontinued after they left the job. For instance, a participant told us that her organization's use of Twitter was based entirely on one worker's expertise: “We used Twitter for the nine months that we had the social networking intern last year. And then when she left, we didn't use Twitter.”

Constraints on Time, Funding, and Expertise

The work of social media management is characterized by pragmatic constraints in terms of time and human and financial resources. Time constraints were the primary concern of most of the nonprofits. Even though social media were initially perceived as an easy, low-cost way to communicate, most of the nonprofits still felt that social media sites were very time consuming and that they lacked the time to make use of them fully. Consequently, nonprofit point persons normally focused on only one or two social media channels, even when they saw other new or alternative social media sites as potentially useful:

As a smaller organization, a Twitter account and a Facebook page are pretty much all we can handle at this moment. I think as far as social media go, we have to devote our time to quality over quantity when it comes to that.

Social media management was also limited by financial resources in small organizations. Nonprofits cannot usually

afford to hire dedicated staff to manage social media channels, nor can they often hire social media or marketing firms to help with social media management techniques. Many participants also complained about Facebook's new News Feed algorithm, which charges nonprofits to promote their posts in users' News Feeds. Because the nonprofits did not have the budget for social media advertising, this dramatically limited the organic reach of their Facebook pages:

Facebook also has its sharing algorithm, which is very different than it used to be a few years ago. And I think that it limits how many of your supporters see your post. Their promotion scheme, where they're trying to charge for increased visibility of your post, I think is absolutely killing the platform for nonprofits. I just really think that Facebook should have an exemption for 501(c)(3)-recognized nonprofits, that our pages shouldn't have to be subjected to promotion functions. We should be able to have our supporters see all of our posts at all times for free.

Finally, the nonprofits' social media channels were constrained by their internal lack of expertise in differentiating their use of different social media sites. Several participants noted that they posted the exact same content on Facebook and Twitter, and used automatic synchronizing tools to link different sites, despite the significant differences between the two sites in terms of audiences and features. Other participants, however, pointed out problems in using such auto-link strategies across different sites:

The one thing that we never ever do for any reason, ever, upon penalty of me being very angry, is

you never, ever, ever post on Facebook what's on Twitter. Facebook and Twitter are not synonymous. The platforms don't work together, so stop trying to make them work together.

The Politics of Social Media Management

The nonprofits we studied had their own organizational policies or guidelines that regulated their social media use regarding the approval of content, ownership of social media sites, and interaction with social media followers. However, these organizational norms and routines did not always work collaboratively with their social media practice and public engagement goals.

For many, the decision to adopt social media required approval or was decided by higher-level organizations or managers. One participant who worked for a local branch of a national nonprofit explained that the former was strictly constrained by the latter's rules regarding which sites could be used by each level:

Twitter goes to our Ohio account. Facebook, we're not able to do that. We have a blog, but we don't have any control over that. We just submit things to it once in a while. Flickr, we can't have one of those. So those are national; I don't think we're allowed to. We don't have very much available to us. Instagram is another one.

In addition, many participants noted that they had a complex approval process regarding the content strategies and actions on social media sites to make sure that posts were considered appropriate and did not contain any typos or other errors. Furthermore, this approval process regarding which features or content strategy to use greatly influenced the nonprofits' interaction

and engagement with social media audiences. For instance, a participant talked about how her director's preference and approval processes limited the organizations' ability to use social media for public engagement:

Our main director doesn't like hashtags for some reason. I think they're a great tool to use when you're using Twitter. Now, on my personal account, I use them a lot. When it comes to responding to different posts from other organizations, it's kind of hard to go through that approval process. We'll like on Facebook or favorite something that somebody says on Twitter, but we won't necessarily respond in words.

Design Implications

Our findings provide a background for understanding the challenges for small organizations in using social media to engage with diverse stakeholders and enact different public engagement goals. Small organizations need to better understand and evaluate the success of their social media performance, especially given the lack of awareness and information regarding their social media audiences and whether social media can foster long-term, productive relationships with those audiences. Small organizations also face several inter-organizational challenges that sometimes hinder their engagement goals. These all call for significant design and research trajectories to support complex social media use for public engagement in small organizations.

Managing Social Media Multiplexity for Engagement

For small organizations, the challenges of engaging diverse stakeholders involve not just one single social media platform

but also a complex social media ecosystem. In this research, we found evidence of how small nonprofits perceived the effectiveness of different social media sites: Facebook was seen as effective at engaging general public audiences; Twitter was seen as particularly useful for engaging other organizations and reporters; and blogs were seen as effective at aggregating diffuse information scattered across other social media platforms. These insights extend prior work examining nonprofits' use of social media in understanding their practices on a single social media platform² and discussion about the effectiveness of different social media sites in advocacy.³

However, to be effective for small organizations, using multiple social media sites requires expertise, time, a relatively stable workforce, and proper collaboration among organizational staff. Most small organizations are constrained in their capacities to be able to manage and fully maximize the power of multiple social media platforms. Our findings indicate that social media platforms and tools to manage or make creative use of those platforms (such as Hootsuite, Sprout, and Storify) should better support heterogeneous content strategies, audiences, and stakeholders of organizational social media sites. Social media management systems should be designed not only to provide tools to manage multiple sites but also to provide guidance on how to use the unique affordances of each site to engage with different stakeholders. Visualization tools should provide straightforward and integrated summaries of individual and overall performance of different social media platforms. In addition, there is a need for tools to track interactions with different stakeholders, such as the number of retweets, @s, and conversations with other organizations, reporters, and donors.

Connecting Information, Community, and Action

We found that small nonprofits, like large ones, seek to fulfill different engagement goals through social media sites. Social media are seen as promising for increasing information and awareness but less effective at engaging with community or mobilizing people into the types of action that the organizations want to engender. These results echo previous literature, which found that nonprofits failed to use social media for dialogic communication⁴ and faced the challenge of “slacktivism,” in which participants only make minimum support efforts online without devoting real actions.⁵

Another challenge for small organizations is the lack of accurate feedback regarding their social media performance. Though social media analytical tools that aim to measure social media success exist, these tools primarily target business sectors that measure the return on investment (ROI) of technology use such as sales and brand value. Most of these tools are also not free, which limits small organizations’ ability to use them.

These findings have many implications for the design of social media analytical assessment tools for public engagement. There is, in particular, an absence of metrics that assess social media’s connection to important outcomes such as fundraising and volunteer recruitment. In addition to measuring the ROI of social media sites, it is also critical to support connections between social media performance and public participation performance. There is a need to connect social media analytical tools with more situated traces and records of which social media followers are really engaged and motivated to action—possibly through organizational information systems and metadata of volunteers’ and donors’ information

(such as linking to online volunteer recruitment-management tools such as VolunteerMatch.org and fundraising sites such as giveforward.com) as well as existing volunteer or donor e-mail lists. These tools should also help aggregate detailed demographic and background information of participants to help small organizations better target and filter highly motivated audiences and mobilize them from “likers” to engaged actors.

Supporting Organizational Social Media Management

In our study, we also highlighted several organizational factors that influenced social media use in small organizations’ public engagement practice. It is crucial for computer-human interaction (CHI) researchers to acknowledge these constraints when designing social media tools for small organizations. It is also important pragmatic information for small organizations that want to facilitate their social media sites’ engagement with diverse communities.

We found that multiple people were typically involved in the nonprofits’ social media management—either through dividing work among staff members or sharing responsibilities with multiple staff, specialists, and volunteers. This strategy poses potential problems related to coordination and quality control; it can also blur the boundaries between personal and organizational accounts.⁶ In addition, existing social media sites are usually designed for one account per organization or person who manages the public account. As a result, there is a need for social media management tools that support multiple users and multiple accounts, and provide the necessary links or distance between official and unofficial organizational social media accounts. In order to support efficient

social media management within small nonprofits, the design of organizational social media platforms should also effectively incorporate the organizational internal workflow with different social media sites, such as drafting, editing, approving, and scheduling posts.

In addition, organizational norms and routines, such as unwieldy, slow, and/or hierarchical approval processes, also prevented small organizations from being creative in content strategies, being interactive in communication strategies, and, in some cases, even adopting useful social media channels. In general, participants expressed a desire for greater flexibility and autonomy regarding social media site decisions and strategies. The influence of organizational norms and culture reflected the influence of power-oriented structures on the use of technology in the adaptive structuration theory,⁷ and was found in social media use in other organizational contexts.⁸ This suggests that small organizations should identify and resolve tensions between different constituents and coordinate to find the best strategies for using social media for public-engagement goals. Our findings also indicate that the design of organizational social media management tools should provide proper editing or management rights to certain aspects of work and organizational staff—for example, which type of work should be approved by which group of people—in order to mitigate conflicts between organizational power and efficiency of social media management.

NOTES

1. All quotes are from interviews with participants in the study unless otherwise noted.
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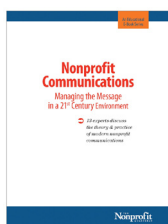
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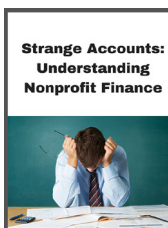
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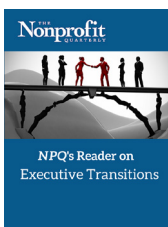
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