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Nonprofit Use of Social Media: Insights from the Field

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Keywords: nonprofit organizations, social media, social networking, technology

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Nonprofit Use of Social Media: Insights from the Field

Abstract

This study focuses on social media use in nonprofit organizations and how nonprofits perceive and strategize about the use of social media platforms. The study was open to any nonprofit organization actively engaged in the use of social media and fifteen different nonprofit organizations were purposefully selected for inclusion in the study. Through interviews with the social media strategists employed by the organizations, the researcher created a foundation for understanding perceptions of effective strategies for social media use in these nonprofits. While participants described a variety of social media platforms, discussion revolved primarily around the use of Facebook and Twitter. Analysis of the data resulted in the formation of six themes that included: nature of social media, online/offline action, social media is social, strategic/data driven, authentic, and power of the story. Together, these themes provide insights into how these organizations approached the use of social media.

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), "Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p. 61). These tools provide nonprofit organizations with opportunities for low cost and powerful connections with their stakeholders, and are especially relevant as use of social media is on the rise in both teen and adult populations (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). At the same time, however, these connections also present new challenges and give a previously unprecedented level of control to the users (Tredinnick, 2006; Berman, Abraham, Battino, Shipnuck, & Neus, 2007). The goal of this paper is to examine how nonprofit practitioners perceive social media and strategize about the use of social media platforms. This study was open to any nonprofit actively engaged in the use of social media in an effort to understand how nonprofit use of social media might be similar or different from social media use in corporate and government organizations. To this end, the researcher investigated the following research questions.

RQ1: How do nonprofit social media strategists perceive social media platforms?

RQ2: What strategies do nonprofit social media strategists believe are effective for using social media?

Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted on the perceptions and strategies related to social media usage. These studies span corporate, governmental, and nonprofit uses. A look at each of these sectors demonstrates some of the differences and help to set the stage for the work being presented.

Corporate

Research conducted on corporate use of social media suggests that corporations approach social media as a way to engage their consumers. Interviews conducted by DiStaso, McCorkindale, and Wright (2011) with corporate executives revealed that corporations recognize the importance of engaging on social media, especially where the consumers are engaging. However, the interviews also suggested that there were more questions than answers and called for training both on the social media tools

needed as well as how to measure their effectiveness. From a corporate perspective, there have been some attempts to better understand how to engage users on social media. For example, Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011) suggested seven functional building blocks of social media including identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. They proposed that, by analyzing organizations from these different angles, an individual could better understand the relationship between the organization and the social media tools they tried to utilize. Additionally, Hanna, Rohm, and Crittenden (2011) suggested that companies needed to approach social media as more of an ecosystem than a tool and provided several recommendations for engaging consumers. Their recommendations focused on strategically understanding how each social media platform interacted with the organization to create experiences for their users that were unique and offered clear stories.

While some of these strategies would likely be similar for nonprofit organizations, corporations have their own reasons for engaging on social media. For example, Jung, Naughton, Tahoun, and Wang (2015) described how firms used Twitter to tweet monthly earnings reports opportunistically by only tweeting good news and not bad. Asur and Huberman (2010) described how corporate organizations attempted to utilize micro-blogging sites like twitter to predict box office revenues from movies prior to their release. These methods seemed to be consistent with the idea that the practical application of social media in business is to shape the opinion of consumers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Methods like these suggest ulterior motives for engagement, and highlight a need for transparency that has begun to emerge in the corporate sector. For example, DiStaso and Bortree (2012) surveyed 315 corporate communicators about their use of social media and all but two

reported needing to use social media to show corporate transparency. Participants in the study attempted to foster transparency primarily by using social media to share what the organization was doing and why.

Government

Government organizations also engage on social media for a variety of reasons. Research on government use of social media has focused on ways to increase interaction among citizens and create transparency in government processes (Jaeger & Munson, 2010). In a study with over 250 government employees, Picazo-Vela, Gutierrez-Martinez, and Luna-Reyes (2012) attempted to understand the risks, benefits, and alternatives to social media use in the public sector. The findings of the study suggested that social media strategists in the government sector believed that social media use could improve communication and participation among citizens. Additionally, they also recognized the importance of strategy and the need for change in existing government structures prior to attempting such a change.

The role of social media in government has evolved from a simple online presence to a more interactive purpose that is ultimately aimed toward citizen collaboration. Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, and Hovy (2010) described two different stages of government use of the internet. The first stage was primarily focused on the dissemination of information and did little to engage citizens. The second stage, however, focused more on broad based involvement through the use of social media. While the authors note that this second stage is still evolving, they suggested that best practices in this stage will be centered on using social media to foster more of an open government that encourages disruptive innovation and shared governance. Examples from the authors included using RSS (Rich Site Summary) for disaster news feeds, widgets (stand-alone, mini-applications embedded in a website) for lists of most

wanted individuals, and social networking sites for agency recruitment. This work suggested that using social media to primarily share information was less effective than using the tools to encourage widespread collaboration and engagement. This also illuminated one of the primary differences between corporate and government reasons for engaging on social media. While corporate focus is primarily on targeted audiences such as consumers, government focus is on maximum inclusion.

This desire for inclusion brings many new issues to the forefront such as access inequality as well as issues of law and policy. For example, Jaeger and Bertot, (2010) described how the Obama administration sought to increase transparency through e-government. While that seemed to be a worthwhile effort, the authors described how there needed to be more work done to address issues related to internet access. They also described how the information needed to be designed in a way that made it not just available, but also usable by citizens. Additionally, Jaeger, Bertot, and Shilton, (2012) further highlighted the digital divide and stressed the importance of additional research on social media implementation, perception, and usage.

Nonprofit

Research on nonprofit strategies and perceptions has shown that nonprofits have a history of engagement on social media platforms. In a survey of 409 nonprofit public relation practitioners, Curtis et al. (2010) found that all but five were using social media in some way to engage with their stakeholders; however, in a content analysis of Facebook in 275 nonprofit organizations Waters, Burnett, Lamm, and Lucas (2009) found that nonprofits were primarily using social media for the disclosure of information. The authors argued that nonprofits were not taking full advantage of the benefits associated with social media. Additionally, Bortree and Seltzer (2009) conducted a study

using 50 Facebook profiles from environmental advocacy groups to determine their dialogic strategies. The results of this study suggested that the organizations simply created a Facebook profile, but failed to create any significant relationships on those profiles. A similar analysis of websites utilized by environmental nonprofit organizations in Canada came to the same conclusion (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009).

These findings are consistent with research that has been conducted on nonprofit use of the social media platform Twitter. By analyzing Twitter feeds, Waters and Jamal (2011) found that of the top 200 fundraising nonprofits in the United States, 81 were actively using Twitter to communicate with their audience. Their findings also suggested that nonprofits were using social media (in the case Twitter) primarily to engage in one-way communication. Similar analyses of nonprofit Twitter usage have also supported these findings (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). More recent work by Saxton and Waters (2014) in which they analyzed content from 1,000 Facebook updates from the nonprofit organizations suggested that stakeholders prefer messages that open dialogue between them and the organization.

Much of the research described above suggests that social media networks like Twitter and Facebook are not being effectively utilized. However, these findings are largely based on formal observations of social media usage from an outside perspective. While these efforts are helpful in forming an understanding of the use of social media in nonprofit organizations, they fail to capture the thoughts and perspectives of the practitioners who engage in nonprofit social media design. The purpose of this work is to present findings from qualitative interviews with social media strategists in nonprofit organizations. This is done in an effort to clarify perceptions of nonprofit social media

use and explore the strategies they use for engaging their stakeholders.

Method

Participants

The study was open to any nonprofit actively engaged in the use of social media and the participants in this study were social media strategists in nonprofit organizations. For the purposes of this paper, social media

strategists will be operationally defined as the individuals who are responsible for designing, developing, implementing, and monitoring social media efforts in nonprofit organizations. These individuals were purposefully selected because their work in using social media, from an outside perspective, appeared to be actively engaging the organizations' stakeholders. This study included 15 participants (see Table 1).

Participant Title	Nonprofit Organization
Social Media Strategist	Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation
Communications and Content Manager	Americans for the Arts
Senior Manager of Online Strategy	Best Friends Animal Society
Director	Center for Civic Leadership
New Media Production Coordinator	Convoy of Hope
Social Media Strategist	DoSomething.org
Founder	Friends Without Borders
Outreach Liaison	Love Without Borders Foundation
Founder and CEO	Masrawyya
Director	Peace Innovation Lab at Stanford
Marketing Strategist	ROK ICT
Director of Online Community	Share Our Strength
Associate Director	Slow Money
Community and Events Manager	Surfrider Foundation
Online and Media Coordinator	Women for Women International

Table 1: List of Participants and Titles in Alphabetical Order by Nonprofit Organization

Design

This research used a descriptive qualitative analysis with data gathering and analytical methods inspired by grounded theory. The sampling method used in the data collection was a criterion sampling method described by Creswell (2007). Participants were initially identified through an internet search using websites that collected information

about nonprofits (e.g. Causes.com, TopNonprofits.com, and others), and the criteria for inclusion in the study required that the nonprofits be actively engaged on social media platforms. Active engagement was defined as having consistent interaction (e.g. continued engagement with their stakeholders) on Twitter and Facebook with an active followership. Nonprofit social media

strategists who were engaged in this way were considered for inclusion in the study. The list of participants was not preselected, and new participants were continually added until the data was believed to have reached saturation. Potential participants were contacted through email and, upon tentative acceptance, were sent information describing the study as well as a copy of the informed consent. The interviews were semi-structured and typically lasted approximately one hour with the option of a follow-up interview not to exceed one hour. Participants were interviewed over the internet using the Skype voice-over-internet-protocol (VOIP) program, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Efforts were made to select organizations that were diverse in size and reason for engaging.

Instruments

Participant interviews were semi-structured and guided by key questions that were designed to illuminate ways in which the participants perceived and strategized the use of social media in their organization. Following the recommendations of Creswell (2007), the questions were broken into three domains 1) the central question, 2) issue sub-questions, and 3) procedural sub-questions. The central research question asked participants to describe their experience in using social media and was designed to help provide a broad overview of the perceptions of social media in the nonprofit organization. The issue sub-questions were designed to follow the central question and to examine more specific reasons the nonprofits chose to engage on social media platforms. These questions were primarily concerned with why participants chose to engage on social media and what tools they used. Finally, the procedural sub-questions were designed to understand the process of using social media. These questions focused on the strategy of using social media along with the challenges, major events, and outcomes associated with the use of social media.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was influenced by the recommendations of Strauss and Corbin (1990), using open and axial codes to describe the data that emerged from the transcriptions. The open codes represented the tentative ideas that emerged, and the axial codes represented connections between the open codes. Analysis of the open and axial codes resulted in the creation of six themes that were used to describe nonprofit use of social media. For reliability purposes, a second coder was utilized in the data analysis. Each coder reviewed and developed themes independently from the transcripts, using the constant comparative method described by Glaser (1965). During the data analysis process the coders reviewed the transcripts as the interviews progressed and looked for significant statements, which were statements from participants that the coder believed had significance for understanding the way in which participants perceived and/or strategized about the use of social media. After the transcripts had been reviewed, the significant statements were coded, discussed, and combined to form the open and axial codes. Codes were discussed until agreement was reached, and codes that could not be agreed upon were discarded. This continued until no new codes were found, at which point the information was deemed to have reached saturation.

Results and Discussion

As a result of the 15 interviews, 558 significant statements were extracted. Of those 558 significant statements, 100 open codes, 32 axial codes, and six themes were developed. These themes represent a broad overview of how the social media strategists in the study perceived and strategized about the use of social media. A summary of the themes and examples of the axial and open codes has been provided in Table 2.

Theme	Example Axial Codes	Example Open Codes	<i>f</i>
Nature of Social Media	Social Media Changes Quickly; Respect the Medium	Focus of Attention Changes Quickly; Personal Actions are Amplified; Engage Where Your Followers Engage; Don't Try to Recreate Social Media Platforms;	218
Online / Offline Action	Online Action can Influence Offline Action; Offline Action can Influence Online Action;	Well Thought Through Social Media Efforts can Motivate Offline Action; Offline Action can Inspire Online Action; Real World Events can Lead People to Engage Online;	36
Social Media is Social	Make Engagements Meaningful; Don't Abuse the Connection	Create a Two-Way Street with Followers; Abusing Your Connection Leads to a Loss of Followers; Don't Do All the Talking	84
Strategic / Data Driven	Dedicated Support for Social Media; Data Driven	Have a Strategy for Engaging Your Followers; Social Media Efforts Should be Guided by Data; Monitor Activity	152
Authentic	Real; Quality vs. Quantity	Quality Relationships are more Valuable than Quantity of Followers; Organic/Quality Growth is Slow and Steady	40
Power of the Story	Powerful Stories Thrive in Social Media	Action is Often Based on Powerful Stories; Powerful Stories Gain Attention	28

Table 2: Themes, Example Axial Codes, and Example Open Codes

The codes and themes highlight some of the topics and ideas that emerged from the discussion with the nonprofit social media strategists. While the participants described a variety of social media platforms, the primary platforms discussed were Facebook and Twitter. The following is a more in-depth discussion of the findings in an attempt to provide a better understanding of each.

Theme One: Nature of Social Media

The first theme, nature of social media, was composed of 218 significant statements. The codes that emerged in this theme provided insights into the intricacies of working within the social media environment. This provided both a foundation for understanding work in the social media environment, as well as what

should be expected from attempts to engage online. This included a focus on some of the ways in which social media tools have, and continue to, influence and impact the organizations.

Participants described respecting the medium, going where the people are, and the variety of uses for social media. With regard to respecting the medium, interview participants discussed at length the importance of treating each social media platform as a unique and separate entity from other social media platforms. To this end, the way that content was structured on each of the different platforms varied depending on the nature of the social media platform. For example, participants described the nature of Twitter as being quick and short lived, so they

felt comfortable posting more frequently; whereas organizations using Facebook would post more lengthy content less often. In the words of one participant, "...you have to respect each medium and treat it differently. We have a different strategy for something on Pinterest than we would on Facebook."

Several participants described efforts to recreate the social media environment on platforms that they controlled and managed. The end result of these efforts was an extensive amount of time and effort with little to no interaction from the target audience. Participants believed that the reason for this lack of success depended on a number of issues, but primarily because people were already engaging on established social media platforms (e.g. Twitter and Facebook). Followers of the organizations did not want to sign up for another social media platform when all of their friends were already on the mainstream social media websites. One participant described the need to engage with followers in ways that they were already engaging,

People don't want to sign up for another thing; I hardly use [other social media]. I'm there but I'm not actively doing anything with it because it doesn't really matter in the big scheme of things. So trying to recreate a tool that is already being used is unnecessary...

While it was important to respect the medium and go where the people were, participants were able to use a variety of social media platforms to engage with their audiences. The primary platforms that were used by participants in this study were Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Participants described how certain populations and groups of people engaged more with specific social media platforms than others, while some groups utilized several at once. One participant commented, "...there's so many different social networks out there to get involved with and just having a good sense of what you think is worth your time and what the return

on investment is." What became apparent through the interviews was not that the participants were using every social media platform, but that they were using the ones that were being used by the people with which they wanted to connect. In addition, participants described how they were able to integrate existing social media platforms into their websites to provide more customized content and opportunities for their target audiences.

Participants described various features of social media, the strengths and weaknesses of the features, and how those features provided opportunities. The strengths revolved around the sheer number of people who were engaging on social media and the wide reach of these platforms. The weaknesses discussed, however, focused on how to create authentic and meaningful connections with stakeholders in these virtual environments. The threat in attempting to engage was that, if done incorrectly, the participants in the study might alienate current and new stakeholders by turning them off to the organization. Alternatively, the interaction of these strengths and weaknesses also created opportunities for developing new support as well as engaging individuals already committed to the organizations cause. For example, participants discussed the low cost and high impact of social media. Participants described the opportunities they had to spread their message in ways that had never before been possible. One participant commented:

This all can be done by a handful of people...with very few dollars. It's not like you have to have tens of thousands of boots on the ground like we did in the 60s. It can be done by a handful of people with very few dollars and a little technology.

Participants also focused on how social media empowered the nonprofits and the people who followed them in a number of different ways. As one participant described, "I think

people are so empowered right now; they feel that social media empowers them and they are bought into making change in some way. Whatever that might be, they won't want to lose that right." Participants described how social media platforms were incredibly open to the public and gave everyone a voice to say what they wanted without the fear of traditional consequences associated with face-to-face interactions. Participants believed this empowered the organizations by opening new avenues for engagement because everyone could contribute in some way, whether that was simply liking a status or organizing a local effort. It should be noted here that there were several modalities used in developing this sense of empowerment and engagement. While the initial connections were made using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, other forms of communication were also utilized to maintain and sustain contact with participants. These included, but were not limited to, integrating connections into more traditional forms of communication such as mail, email, text, and phone.

Another aspect of social media that was discussed by participants was how quickly the social media environment changed. This was true for both the social media platforms and the users that engaged on these platforms. From the platform side, it became apparent that new social media tools were emerging on a regular basis. This made it difficult to stay informed and aware of the most recent and effective social media tools. One participant commented,

I just had to do a three year plan for social media and it's kind of a joke because obviously Facebook changes its layout and its rules every three months, and the same thing with Twitter. It's all constantly evolving and so it's really hard to make plans more than three to six months in advance because something I think is going to be awesome might not even be an option next month.

In addition, the existing social media platforms also changed on a regular basis making it challenging for individuals to continually use them effectively. The users of the social media platforms also shifted and changed attention quickly, which added a level of difficulty to the work of the participants.

The way that social media amplified the message was another important component of understanding the nature of social media. In this respect, social media had a beneficial and detrimental side. Social media allowed for the bolstering and emphasizing of important organizational ideas and offered instant communication, which was incredibly useful and helpful for the participants and their organizations. One participant described social media as, "...a tinder box. The potential for things to go viral and to catch on is really there, so whatever you do can become amplified in major ways. Just by design there's an incredible potential there." However, the personal actions of the participants and their organizations were also under a new level of scrutiny and criticism regardless of how careful they were. Participants shared that it was difficult to evaluate how a message would be received by both the stakeholders of the nonprofit organization as well as non-stakeholders. No matter how carefully they crafted their messages, they had no control over how the message would ultimately be interpreted, and negatively perceived messages could have consequences for the organization.

The next discussion topic regarding the nature of social media focused on the volatility that seemed to surround the social media environment. In addition to changing quickly, many attempts to create change failed in the social media environment despite best efforts of the participants. What became evident was that reactions in social media were hard to predict. Several participants commented on the term "going

viral” and being asked, or told, to make the organization go viral saying things like,

... [movements] seem to be started by some random event that really catalyzes people and gives people a lot of motivation to act, and you can't predict that. They are almost like social epiphanies that happen, and it's very hard to design those.

All agreed that this was not something that could be controlled or even planned for and that any content placed on social media was no longer under the control of the person who posted it but by the people who viewed the content. This aspect of the nature of social media was further complicated by the fact that none of the participants thought of themselves as social media experts. Many of the participants had success through trial and error and strongly believed that anyone claiming to be a social media expert would be questionable because social media cannot be understood at that level, yet.

Many of the participants compared social media to traditional media. Several described it as just a different medium, but one that opened new opportunities to interact; whereas traditional media relied on interruption advertising (e.g. television commercials), social media provided an opportunity to interact with the user in a way that traditional media was unable to accomplish. The main difference here focused on the possibility of having a two-way connection with social media vs. a one-way connection with traditional media. These new avenues changed the way that the users interacted with the sender of the message. It was noted that much of the younger generation was engaging in non-traditional ways, and participants described the lack of necessity for traditional media in reaching their audience because their audience was completely online. One participant commented,

I think this year [the organization] pretty much eliminated all print media advertising because they don't have to use it; because their audience lives online. Their average age of a person that interacts with [the organization] is 17 or 17 and a half.

Participants also described how it was easier to raise awareness and garner support for their causes because social media allowed them to reach new audiences and create new opportunities. At the same time, it allowed them to extend local expertise to different geographic locations without the challenge of having to travel around the world. For example, participants would often use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter to establish connections between organizational experts and some of the more geographically distant parts of the organization. Additionally, participants described how they would never have been able to have the kind of reach that they have now without social media, and often cited unprecedented support from individuals in various countries around the world with statements like,

I'm always shocked to learn about our audiences on social networks. Our third most popular city that interacts with us is Paris, France. I just wouldn't expect that at all, and we actually get a lot of comments from Brazil and Turkey and countries that we don't even have chapters in.

Theme Two: Online/Offline Action

The second theme, online/offline action, was composed of 36 significant statements. The codes that emerged in this theme focused on the relationship between how online actions can influence offline actions and vice versa. They also explored the nature of the relationship between online/offline engagements. The terms “action” and “engagement” were often used interchangeably and seemed to have a shared focus on connecting with others in a

meaningful way to create change. This change often occurred online in the form of some virtual change (e.g. signing a virtual petition or spreading information), and offline in the form of physical action (e.g. attending an event or engaging in service).

In conversations about online action influencing offline action, participants discussed their experiences in using social media in a variety of ways to engage people offline. This included using social media to publicize important issues related to the organization. Additionally, social media was used to organize and communicate across factions when working to accomplish change. As one participant described,

I soon found out [followers of the organization] were following whatever was happening [in the organization] through my profile, and the first step to change anything is to know that something wrong is happening. So they knew, and they got involved, and they started sharing...

Through the discussions, it became clear that the influence of social media was not just one way. Participants described how offline action could serve as an example for online action. Many participants discussed how they used work they were doing in their communities as sources of content in the online environment. Additionally, work being done on a specific topic or issue could be utilized to engage others, especially if that work was inspiring.

Real world events also played a role in the mobilization of individuals through social media. Participants described how some movements or change efforts occurred online solely out of reaction to a real world event. This led to the idea that offline and online action were not mutually exclusive processes. Several participants described how they used online and offline action in complementary ways. One participant commented:

I see [online/offline action] as a Venn diagram or just concentric circles. As the program activity grows, awareness about it grows and the community discussing it grows. As the community discussing it grows, more people get involved and more people are able to take action steps.

It also became apparent that followership online did not ensure offline action and that different people would engage in different ways, but should still be treated with the same respect and consideration that face-to-face individuals would receive. Finally, in an effort to create a beneficial relationship, participants described how it was important to do something that was not already being done, while making it easy for individuals to engage and by providing a range in levels of engagement. For example, one participant discussed organizational campaigns and how, as the social media strategist, they would offer different ways for people to get involved in the campaign. At the very basic level this included simply liking or sharing about the campaign. At the other end, however, there were also options for followers to become fully engaged and volunteer with the campaign based on their level of interest/passion.

Theme Three: Social Media is Social

The third theme, social media is social, was composed of 84 significant statements. The codes that emerged in this theme focused on the idea that social media is about connecting with people in meaningful ways. Participants described the importance of understanding that social media is social in nature, which had a number of implications for the participants as they sought to create change in the social media space. Discussions around this topic primarily focused on connecting with people in meaningful ways while remaining active, but not abusing the connection to the followers. This included conversations regarding the danger in only pushing information out and never taking in information from followers. Individuals who

followed the nonprofit organizations needed to feel like they had a relationship with them in which there was a two-way street for communication.

Part of building the relationship with the followers involved making the engagements meaningful, which included remembering important dates that followers cared about, creating content that was relevant to them, and rewarding engagement in some way whether it was tangible or intangible. This was often described as being work intensive, but critical in maintaining support from the follower base. One participant commented:

I think the most important thing that we learned is that people want to know that there's someone behind the curtain. People like to be talked to and they're engaging with your brand because they really like you and because they believe in what you do.

This also meant that not all of the content posted was specific to the organization or the cause that the nonprofit was working toward. In fact, some content had nothing to do with the cause, but was posted because followers would connect with a funny picture or a compelling statement or story. This specific idea primarily came from participant perceptions, but no tangible examples were shared to support this assertion.

Discussion with participants on this topic also focused on finding ways to remain active without abusing the connection to the audience. Participants described how it was vital to post content on a regular basis in efforts to consistently engage with followers. At the same time, many of the participants targeted specific campaigns to selected audiences as much as possible to prevent overloading the pages of users who might not be impacted by the campaign. For example, an organization would not post news about a new state policy for Oklahoma to their constituents in Oregon. This was done primarily out of fear that including everyone

would cause some followers to disengage from information overload.

Theme Four: Strategic/Data Driven

The fourth theme, strategic/data driven, was composed of 152 significant statements. The codes that emerged in this theme focused on the need for social media to be implemented strategically. Part of this strategy often included finding individuals with influence to support the cause. Different participants had access to different individuals; whether they were local heroes or worldwide celebrities, their endorsements often provided helpful spikes in followership and spreading of messages.

It was also important for the social media efforts to have someone who was dedicated to the support of the social media networks. Having these individuals dedicated to the social media networks not only allowed the necessary time for cultivating relationships, but also helped create a singular voice for the cause or organization with which people could connect. It allowed the participants to continually focus on new ways to engage the users and try new things. In the words of one participant, "I'm fortunate enough to be the online voice for [the organization]. So that in everything I write, whether it's a little tweet or a comment, I take that serious."

In addition to being dedicated to social media, the participants were also the ones who carefully thought through the content that went on their social media networks. Knowing they would lose control once they posted the content, they carefully designed the content to be useable for their audience as well as audiences that were outside their target demographic. These efforts were often closely monitored by using free or low cost monitoring tools. The monitoring tools most commonly utilized by the participants in the study were Google Analytics and HootSuite because these tools provided the participants with a broad and comprehensive view of what was happening across all the platforms in

which they were engaged. This allowed them to see the effects of their current content and adjust to make it better in the future. While all participants had unique strategies for tracking their users, they all used some form of tracking. As one participant commented, "I'm looking at metrics; I'm looking at engagement more than followers. Followers are definitely something I still include, but I'm looking more for retweets, @ mentions on Twitter, and Facebook comments, likes, and shares, essentially."

Theme Five: Authentic

The fifth theme, authentic, was composed of 40 significant statements. The codes that emerged in this theme focused on the need for consistent and quality interactions on social media that were both inspiring and real. The need for authenticity stood out because influence in social media was based on the ability of the relationship between the social media strategists and the stakeholders to inspire others to action while being consistent in the way the audience is approached. Participants described how it was their passion, or the passion of a group of people, that motivated others to get involved. At the same time, however, as they developed relationships with their followers, the followers came to know and appreciate them for who they were. If they tried to change their online personality at some point it became an issue because participants believed people could tell if they were being fake. Part of this authenticity also came from the trust that was developed in the relationship. This trust was dependent on the relationship and the transparency of the work being done. Participant comments around this idea included, "I don't think the idea of manipulating anybody really works in social media. When something really does resonate with people and your friends start liking it, that's when things really happen."

Another important component of authenticity dealt with the issue of quality vs. quantity in relation to the followers. Participants agreed

that authentic growth was slow and steady over time, and that quality relationships were more valuable than the quantity of the followers. Participants gave several examples of corporate sponsored campaigns that were highly successful at gathering millions of likes, follows, etc. only to see that when they asked for engagement there was no one there, as they never developed a relationship with any of these people. As one participant commented,

They're giving away a million dollars so you would think that, of course, everyone's going to see it like we built these emotional connections and people want to win. The truth is that no one was emotionally connected to any of the people who were giving the money because no one organically cared. You can't force people to care.

Followers in campaigns like these were only engaging because there was some tangible reward for a small action that they were willing to take, but they never engaged with the organization again.

Theme Six: Power of the Story

The sixth theme, power of the story, was composed of 28 significant statements. The codes that emerged in this theme focused on the power of stories, and the ability of stories to motivate and personalize issues in social media. In discussion with participants, there was strong agreement that stories played a special role in the social media environment. Stories that were well constructed and powerful not only thrived in social media but could often be used to motivate people to take action. Several individuals who were interviewed described how the organizations they represented were built upon the story of a singular person or event. Even participants who did not have one primary story for the foundation of their cause found and utilized powerful stories within their work. As one participant described,

What we still have to this day is we have a story and I truly believe in the power of the story...many great social movements are driven and motivated based on a series of stories or one single story and that's what we have.

These stories were powerful in a number of ways. First, stories spread easily over social media networks, and because these stories were so easily shared and spread, they gained the attention of large numbers of users. Participants described how powerful stories were impactful and often served to narrow broad problems to something more relatable to the followers. One participant even went as far as to suggest that efforts in social media could not be successful without a powerful story. Other comments focused on why stories worked so well in the social media environment as one participant commented, "What the technology does is takes all the friction out of organizing, it takes all the friction out of communicating and it rewards people who are very skilled at telling a story."

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Limitations

Wilson, Gosling, and Graham (2012) described how much research on social media platforms has been conducted but that much remains to be done. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are incredibly popular and provide a wealth of opportunities for research. However, these networks are complex and careful consideration must be given to how they are studied. Understanding the strategy behind the content and how that content affects the relationship between the organization and the end user can be equally important to understanding the actual content. These interviews provided a number of interesting ideas about the perceptions and strategies of nonprofit social media strategists.

In comparing nonprofit, corporate, and government strategies and perceptions there certainly seemed to be some overlap as the

findings from this study echo other research not specific to nonprofits. While the discussion of the findings in this paper focuses mainly on the potential benefits to other nonprofits, they could also logically be applied to corporate and government organizations. For example, all shared a desire to connect with stakeholders, whether those individuals are consumers, citizens, volunteers, etc. There also seemed to be some agreement about the potential strengths and weaknesses in using social media. It was also interesting to see how the need for authenticity and transparency seemed to be a shared concern for the purposes of building and maintaining positive relationships. Admittedly the challenges here may have been different depending on why organizations engaged. Discussions with the interview participants provided some interesting insights into the role of social media. Participants in the study suggested that part of the power of social media hinged around the ability to build relationships and inspire action. They described the importance of the two-way connection between the social media strategist/organization and the target audience. It was this intentional relationship building that seemed to set nonprofits apart from corporate or government organizations with respect to strategy. The participants in the study described a desire to develop personal relationships with their audiences for the purpose of making progress on topics of shared passion that would likely not be possible or desired for corporate and government organizations.

There are a variety of applications for this research. From a practical perspective, these findings may be helpful for organizations (corporate, government, and nonprofit) who are considering engagement on social media. These organizations would ideally consider the insights from the participants in the study, and take them into consideration as they prepare, implement, and assess their own social media engagement efforts. From a research perspective, this study opens

avenues for further study. Future research might focus on the methods used to engage on social media and whether or not those methods are effective. It would also be interesting to look more closely at the power of stories and the impact they have on engagement from stakeholders. Other avenues might include looking at the relationship between online and offline influence and the role of transparency in the use of social media.

This study was designed to take a broad look at how nonprofits perceive and strategize about the use of social media, and the themes that emerged from the study provide a foundation for understanding these perspectives. However, there are limitations associated with this study. Participant selection, due to the nature of internet search algorithms likely excluded several potential candidates that would have been helpful in contributing to the understanding of nonprofit use of social media. Additionally, given the broad parameters for inclusion and the limited number of participants, the findings presented in this paper are limited to descriptive and directional understanding of nonprofit perceptions of social media. While these findings are not generalizable, they do offer some interesting comparisons to previous work done on the perceptions of social media use. This analysis is just a starting point for understanding the relationship between nonprofit organizations and social media platforms. As these platforms continue to evolve, it will be important to continually study them and seek to understand the potential impact they have on both nonprofit organizations and those who would follow these organizations.

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