Social Media Effectiveness for Public Engagement: Examples of Small Nonprofits

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ABSTRACT
Social media sites are increasingly adopted by small nonprofit organizations (NPOs) to help them meet their public engagement goals. However, several characteristics of small organizations make it hard for them to effectively use social media sites. We present findings from interviews with 26 small NPOs’ social media professionals on how they use multiple social media sites to support public engagement. Small NPOs use multiple social media sites to engage with different stakeholders toward various ends. However, these NPOs are not using social media to its full potential with regard to community-building and action mobilization. Several challenges in small NPOs, such as ineffective measurement of social media performance, deficient organizational resources, and lack of control over work, lead to strong tensions between social media engagement strategies and outcomes. Drawing on these findings, we present several practical implications for the design of successful public engagement social media tools.

Author Keywords
Nonprofit organization; social media; organization

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.3. Information Interfaces and Presentation: Group and Organization Interfaces

INTRODUCTION
Organizations are increasingly using social media to interact with their internal and external stakeholders. Big corporate organizations have used enterprise social media like Yammer and SocialText to support a vast amount of knowledge-sharing and work coordination [9]. Externally, organizations have also used social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter as public engagement tools. For instance, advertisers exploit the power of online social networking to raise awareness about their products, and government agencies also leverage social media to support government services [3].

Recently, social media have also been increasingly adopted in small organizations such as charities, small businesses, and community groups. Social media are especially beneficial for these small organizations in providing cheap and easy ways to allow their campaigns to go viral online and reach a global audience—something previously only available in large organizations with more resources to devote to such efforts.

When using social media for public engagement, all organizations face certain shared barriers, such as dealing with different stakeholders and needing social media training and expertise. As new social media sites appear and evolve, another challenge is to efficiently manage multiple social media sites. For small organizations, this becomes even more challenging because they are unable to confront the overhead involved in learning and managing multiple social media systems.

During our research with a group of small NPOs that focus on advocacy work related to local water and environmental issues, we found that they well represent small organizations in social media use. They face a unique set of needs and constraints distinct from those of large organizations. First, small NPOs are constrained by limited financial resources that affect long-term technology planning and access to technical expertise. Second, small NPOs are tight in human resources and depend heavily on volunteers to fulfill their day-to-day operations, creating a cooperative dynamic that is different from that of corporate organizations where all work is done by paid employees. Third, small NPOs face competition with large NPOs and organizations, both in terms of getting public funding and capturing attention on social media sites [28]. Finally, small NPOs often involve various stakeholders who are more loosely connected to the organization overall [21]. All of these factors lead to a complex assortment of coordination and communication challenges.

By studying how a group of small environmental NPOs use multiple social media sites, we aim to answer four central questions in regard to social media use for public engagement in small organizations. What are the factors that influence small NPOs’ decision-making regarding social media adoption? How do small NPOs use various social media sites to achieve different public engagement goals? How do small NPOs assess the effectiveness of different social media for public engagement? And what are
the organizational challenges that influence how social media support their public engagement goals? Close examination of these challenges can enable small organizations to use different social media tools more effectively for public engagement, and provide design implications for complex social media management in an organizational context. Although we are specifically focused on small NPOs, the need to develop social media strategies with organizational constraints is an issue that all small organizations face.

Related Work

Social Media Use in Organizations

Social media sites have been used widely within organizations as tools for building social capital by providing access to new people and knowledge [26], sharing knowledge [29], and building relationships [7]. Diverse affordances of social media sites such as visibility, editability, persistence, and association have provided rich opportunities to support organization communication [29]. Recently, others have also found that organizations use multiple social media sites to complement each other for communication and knowledge sharing across different work role boundaries [14, 35]. Social media use in organizations has also evolved over time, with the trend being that more social media sites are used to support different aspects of organizational work [36].

Not all social media channels used in the organizational context exist entirely within the organizations. Previous researchers have also explored the value of social media sites in terms of communicating and engaging with stakeholders outside of organizations. Many public sectors such as government agencies actively use social media to engage with citizens to enhance government openness and transparency [3]. Business sectors are also interested in making use of social media to promote sales [11].

Compared with traditional organizations, small organizations face more challenges in leveraging social media sites to fulfill their organizational goals, such as building networks and mobilizing actions. For instance, Robson et al. [23] used Facebook and Twitter to promote a citizen science project, but the contribution of these sites to the effort was less than that of face-to-face communication. Self-organized small organizations were also constrained by limited experience and informal networks when they used social media for action mobilization [1].

NPOs and ICTs Use

NPOs are a critical component of civil society because they serve the public good and social welfare, organized around such issues as healthcare, shelter, and environmental protection. There are 1.5 million NPOs in the United States, about three quarters of which are small NPOs whose annual budgets are under 1 million dollars a year. These small NPOs share and cultivate knowledge and caring for localized areas and they impact and engage local communities. Like other organizations, NPOs have adopted information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as email, databases, websites, etc., to facilitate and improve activities such as volunteer management, internal information management, public relations and fund-raising activities [15, 18]. On the other hand, small NPOs have relatively limited budgets to purchase technology and training [12, 15], while their dynamic and fluid information needs, stakeholders, and work contexts pose various challenges for how ICTs can support their coordination and information management [27, 32].

Social Media Use for NPOs Public Engagement

Recently, many NPOs have started to use social media sites to reach out directly to their audiences around the topics and activities associated with their missions. Social media sites provide many useful affordances for public engagement, such as low-cost platforms, rapid information dissemination channels, and rich interactive features [20]. As a result, social media sites, especially Facebook and Twitter, have been broadly used by NPOs and may have great potential to support NPOs in relationship building and collective action mobilization [17].

Public relations researchers have analyzed the content of large NPO social media sites and derived several categories of engagement-related content strategies. For instance, one study [33] examined 275 large NPOs’ Facebook pages and categorized their social media practice into disclosure, information dissemination and involvement. Other research [10, 13] analyzed the content of several large NPOs’ Twitter pages and categorized them into three main public engagement functions: information, community, and action. The information messages mainly aimed to increase awareness of the organizations’ causes among both current and potential supporters. Community messages aimed to maintain a sense of community through social media interaction. Finally, many messages attempted to convert social media interactions into some other form of advocacy actions, such as fund-raising or attending a face-to-face meeting.

Nevertheless, NPOs lack proper strategies to make use of the technology affordances in their social media platforms to enact these public engagement goals. For instance, Sommerfeldt et al. [25] found that NPOs websites were commonly tailored to highly involved audiences, thus missing the opportunity to extend their reach to new audiences. Other research has suggested that NPOs often do not fully employ the interactive affordances of social media, instead treating social media as a one-way broadcasting platform rather than a two-way interactive tool [13, 31, 34]. However, it is less clear which contextual factors influence NPOs’ effective use of social media sites.

One contextual factor is how NPOs perceive and assess the effectiveness of social media sites in achieving their initial communication and engagement goals. In fact, evaluating social media outcomes and utilities is not as straightforward for NPOs as it is in enterprise sectors, where outcomes can
be assessed directly using the standard return of investment (ROI) metrics. In NPOs, on the other hand, assessment is conducted within a context of uncertain and there are various outcomes that are hard to measured or quantify, such as awareness, volunteers, and funding. A survey conducted by Idealware [30] showed that about only half of US NPOs measured their social media performance; but that for all of those who did, they found a correlation with positive social media outcomes. However, it was still unclear what exact metric NPOs relied on, and whether these measurements accurately reflected their public engagement performance.

Another group of contextual factors tie to several organizational factors that influence NPOs’ social media adoption and use. Previous literature has revealed that the adoption and performance of social media sites in large NPOs is related to organizational strategy, capacity and governance [18]. In addition, resource limitations, miscoordination, blurring between personal and organizational accounts, as well as low media literacy may prevent NPOs from actively using social media [4, 20, 22]. However, it is unknown which factors influence small NPOs’ social media adoption, and how these organizational factors directly influence their efforts at public engagement via social media platforms.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Participants**

We recruited 27 social media “point persons” (9 males) from 26 small environmental NPOs in the United States (2 participants were from the same NPO). The average age of participants was 41 (SD=14.7). 15 participants were communication and marketing specialists, 6 participants were project or executive directors, and 6 participants were technical specialists. All of the NPOs had an average of 15 staff numbers (SD=12.3). To protect the anonymity of participants, we refer to all participants using number IDs.

We used a purposive sampling strategy based on a sampling frame generated by a group of environmental conservation researchers. Most of the NPOs we interviewed focus on issues surrounding waterways and watersheds, though some take a broader environmental approach, in which water issues are only one facet of their work. The nonprofits fall into three general categories: affiliate and university (6), network and policy (11), and community NPOs (12). 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.

We invited people who worked directly with their NPO social media sites to participate in our interview. We identified the individual participants from the NPOs’ website or through referral by their coworkers who were listed as the NPO contact. Participants were recruited through emails, organizational website contact pages, phone calls, and private messages sent through Facebook. We continued recruiting participants until we achieved saturation regarding their use of social media sites. By looking at one group of NPOs with similar missions, we were able to identify and analyze common patterns of social media practice without introducing uncertainty related to the effects of highly different missions, scale, or geographic regions.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

**Semi-structured Interview**

We conducted semi-structured phone interviews [2] with each NPO social media point person. The average interview lasted 45 minutes. We conducted all interviews singly or in a team of two, and all researchers used the same interview protocol, which was designed around the following areas of interest: (1) The background and goal of the NPO and the participant’s role in the organization; (2) The nature of the work undertaken by the participant, with emphasis on how they managed their social media sites; (3) The strategies that the participant and the organization utilized for different social media sites; (4) How participants perceived and assessed the effectiveness of social media sites for their organization; (4) Who constituted their audience on social media sites and how they reached out to that audience; and (5) The challenges that they had in their organization when using social media.

The interview data were collected from Nov 2013 to March 2014. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo 10 [19]. Using a constant comparative coding strategy, we iteratively and inductively developed a coding scheme related to NPOs’ use of social media sites. We used coding strategies such as initial coding, process coding, and in-Vivo coding. We initially developed a set of codes inductively merged from data related to different social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn), social media strategies (e.g., scheduling posts, multimedia, initiating conversation) and organizational factors (e.g., resource allocation, teamwork, multiple roles). During the initial coding, we used analytical memos to examine themes and patterns (e.g., control over social media, fluid workforce). After the coding, we used data analysis tools such as the case-ordered descriptive meta-matrix and the variable-by-variable matrix to further describe and explain the data [16], and deductively categorized NPOs’ social media strategies into three key functions of public engagement: information, community and action [13].

**Content Analysis**

To further understand the strategies that small NPOs articulated in the interview, we conducted a content analysis of their Facebook public page and Twitter account during Sept 2014. We sampled the 30 most recent posts for each NPO’s Facebook and Twitter page. Two coders coded 26 Facebook accounts and 23 Twitter accounts. Deductively
drawing on previous literature about the three key functions of NPOs public engagement: information, community and action [13], we developed a coding schema that contained 9 social media post categories in 3 overarching categories (Table 1).

OVERVIEW OF SMALL NPOS SOCIAL MEDIA USE
In our research, we found that small NPOs used a wide range of social media sites. Many NPOs (13/26) had their own blogs built from WordPress or Drupal, which were an important place to update organizational news, policy issues, and educational resources. Almost every NPO used social networking sites such as Facebook (25/26, followers: 2747±952), Twitter (23/26, followers: 1871±498), LinkedIn (7/26, followers: 180±87) and Google+ (4/26, followers: 41±26). Finally, many NPOs also explored media sharing sites such as Pinterest (4/26, followers: 83±29), Flickr (4/26), Instagram (2/26, followers: 269±75), YouTube (12/26, followers: 130±92), Podcast (2/26) and Vimeo (1/26) to post multimedia content to engage with their audience.

Adoption of Social Media Sites
Small NPOs’ decisions regarding the adoption of social media sites were driven mainly by the needs of different stakeholders. First, they considered if their existing members or potential audience were already on the sites. Facebook, for example, was perceived as the platform that most of their targeted group used: “When we launched our Facebook page, tons of our members liked our Facebook page. And I did our Twitter account within the exact same week, and people were making Twitter accounts to follow me” (P8). Second, NPOs were compelled by the social comparison with peer organizations to adopt these platforms; as one participant put it, “otherwise you’re just gonna get left behind” (P3). Third, they were motivated to demonstrate to funders that they were making efforts to reach out to people in order to satisfy their funders’ expectation. Finally, NPOs selected social media in the hope of expanding their reach to include audiences gathered in different social media channels. For instance, P13 told us the reason that their organization wanted to use Pinterest was to “attract people who are just kind of interested in healthy living or just interested in nontoxic products… at least get people to use it not for advocacy purposes, using it for kind of lifting the general knowledge about what green living would be like”.

Engage with a Diversity of Stakeholders
NPOs worked with a variety group of stakeholders through social media sites, and the interaction with different stakeholders segmented based on the affordances of social media and the popularity of social media among the stakeholders.

NPO Members: NPO members are local citizens who show an interest in the NPO’s cause and sign up for membership, which usually includes sharing their contact information with the NPO. Membership size among the NPOs we examined ranged from 450–17000, and members were the most reliable sources for 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, NPOs mainly used email and newsletters to communicate directly with the members.

Volunteers: Volunteers are important workforces for NPOs, supporting their organizational activities. Social media sites enabled NPOs to post about volunteers recruitment information and give recognition and thanks to volunteers who helped with previous events or activities. In addition, they also frequently posted photos of volunteer activities in Flickr, Instagram, and Facebook albums, and shared these images through social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter.

Funders: NPOs 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, NPOs felt the most effective way to contact and engage with funders was still traditional via communication channels such as email lists and face-to-face meetings.

Other organizations: NPOs (9/26) frequently use 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 other sites, and recognizing and congratulating each other’s work. NPOs saw this as a way to “scratch each other's back” (P11), to support and build relationship with other organizations, get updated about each other’s working progress, and especially “double the poll of viewers” (P11) and expand the follower influence on social media sites. At the same time, some NPOs did feel as though they were primarily connected to other organizations, and still didn’t reach out to the general public enough.

Reporters: Building a positive relationship with reporters and media has long been an important outreach and communication goal for NPOs (6/26), 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 NPOs. Reporters frequently use Twitter features such as retweet, favorite and @ to interact with NPOs, pick up their tweets as news sources, or ask questions on Twitter, which greatly increased NPOs’ online influence. Additionally, NPOs’ social media point persons proactively interacted with reporters in order to strengthen the relationship. As one interviewee explained, one might use the NPO’s social media to “post [reporters’] work, credit their work, try to generate discussions with the individual reporters, and say to them by name” (P20).
DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS AND ENGAGEMENT GOALS: INFORMATION, COMMUNITY, AND ACTION

Small NPOs leveraged multiple social media sites to engage with a variety of stakeholders and their social media practice and activities fell into three engagement goals discussed in previous literature [10, 13]: disseminating information about their causes and the organization; building community and engaging with different stakeholders; and mobilizing action like donation and volunteering work. NPOs actively leveraged different social media sites to fulfill these engagement goals and connected with diverse stakeholders, yet the actual effectiveness of social media for public engagement remained unclear and insufficient.

Increasing Awareness of Information

NPOs 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 (Table 1) of NPOs’ Facebook and Twitter pages illustrated 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, as well as multimedia content such as photo or videos.

NPOs commonly used multiple social media sites together to support the information engagement goal. NPOs frequently shared updates from their websites and blogs, tutorials or educational videos from YouTube, and photos from Flickr or Instagram. NPOs 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 more, 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. (P2)

Multimedia content was also a popular strategy among NPOs. Most participants (13/26) told us that the most effective strategy to solicit shares and comments was to post appealing photographs, usually containing cute animals or beautiful nature scenes. NPOs 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” (P20) for the public to learn more about NPOs.

Building Community

While the purpose of the first engagement goal is to disseminate information, another set of social media practices involve building stronger ties with existing stakeholders and local communities. Content analysis (Table 1) illustrates the types of community posts tied to this goal: interaction with other organizations, conversation with public, giving recognition and thanks, and live posting about volunteer events. NPOs proactively posted questions and discussion topics to prompt interaction and conversation with their audience. For instance, P26 described their experience of posting questions online:

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 alright if they're wrong.

Many NPOs found that hashtags on Twitter—created using the “#” symbol, with users collaboratively contributing content to the hashtag—were particularly helpful to initiate such discussion, as the hashtag format “speaks in ways a sentence can't” (P20). Nevertheless, many NPOs also said that despite using these strategies in their social media, their followers were still not active in participating in the conversations.

Lastly, NPOs frequently posted photos taken during about their work and events, such as conferences or volunteer events, which demonstrated their endeavors and accomplishments to their audience. In some cases, they made use of the “real time,” live properties of Twitter and Facebook by providing live postings of events, with positive results:

That issue went to court and 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 gonna 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 to hear that play. (P18)

Mobilizing Actions

For most NPOs, 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. For instance:

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

Table 1. Content analysis on NPOs Facebook and Twitter

With public, giving recognition and thanks, and live posting about volunteer events. NPOs proactively posted questions and discussion topics to prompt interaction and conversation with their audience. For instance, P26 described their experience of posting questions online:

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 alright if they're wrong.

Many NPOs found that hashtags on Twitter—created using the “#” symbol, with users collaboratively contributing content to the hashtag—were particularly helpful to initiate such discussion, as the hashtag format “speaks in ways a sentence can't” (P20). Nevertheless, many NPOs also said that despite using these strategies in their social media, their followers were still not active in participating in the conversations.

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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 but we don't quite know. (P20)

In our content analysis, we also found that NPOs frequently posted about actionable items: event information, fundraising, advocacy, social media campaigns, or direct calls for action (Table 1). But while NPOs have tried to mobilize actions through social media sites, they typically remain disappointed with the ability 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 NPO has directly asked for such actions. They noted that “liking a Facebook page is not an engagement” (P9), and felt it did not lead to actual action outside the site. They thought the problem was that the social media audience was not “tuned to hear the message” (P7), 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. (P7)

Instead of social media sites, many NPOs (21/26) mentioned that traditional communication tools like email lists or even face-to-face interactions are still more effective in mobilizing people, especially previous volunteers and donors, into action like fund-raising and signing a petition. They reported usually getting pretty good results with such “traditional” calls for action. P3 described one example when they 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 the emails I got. People were forwarding to me the responses they got from the congressman, when they did call.

**Evaluating Social Media Effectiveness: Mismatch with Real Engagement**

One challenge for small NPOs is to define and measure the “success” of social media sites in terms of public engagement. NPOs paid close attention to basic metrics like number of followers, shares and likes, and growth trends of their social media sites. 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. (P19)

Many participants (13/26) also noted that they had been using social media analytics 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 analytic tools, and only looked at anecdotal information rather than tracking numbers systematically. Participants repeatedly tell us that although such analytic tools provide numerous metrics, they are 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 are improving or needs boosting. (P18)

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 the lists of volunteers, members, or donors. Without having clear methods in place to match these sets of information, they felt it was extremely hard to further engage these audiences. For instance, P9 noted that it was hard for their NPOs to compare their Facebook audience with their existing membership list, and that the data from Facebook itself was not quite useful:

For this post the people that like the thing 20 people out of the 329 likers we have here, I don't know who they are. They don't show up on email 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 with our organization. They're disconnected from other parts of communication that you have. …

**THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT OF SMALL NPOS’ SOCIAL MEDIA USE**

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

“All hands on deck” for Social Media Management

In small environmental NPOs, there was usually a shortage of labor for social media management. Participants noted that they commonly “wear a lot of hats” (P14) and were responsible for a variety of communication and public relation tasks. Social media management work, though important, was only one small component on the long list of such tasks. As a result, most NPOs did not have one person wholly dedicated to social media management, but rather distributed the responsibility across a group of staff members.
This “all hands on deck” approach to social media management took several different patterns. The first mode was that each staff member would manage one official social media page that he or she was familiar with. The challenge, as a result, was to coordinate between 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 there were multiple people working collaboratively on these social media 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 be responsible 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 do it. If there's something that I do, I have a question about, it's easy for me to run it by somebody if I want, but it's not required. (P14)

In the third mode, small NPOs 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 NPO’s causes. The official account and the specialist accounts frequently reposted each other’s content and attracted their own audience, which expanded the overall NPO’s influence “like a big web” (P16). This strategy was also perceived as 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 again, 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. (P16)

In addition to the full-time staff, NPOs often relied on their temporary workforce, such as interns or volunteers, to manage their social media sites. These short-term workers were temporary, their schedule frequently changed, and their work discontinued after they left the job. For instance, P9 told us that her organization’s use of Twitter was based entirely on one worker’s expertise: “We used Twitter for nine months that we had the social networking intern last year. And then when she left we didn't use Twitter.”

Constraints in 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 constraint was the primary concern of most NPOs. Even though social media were initially perceived as an easy, low-cost way to communicate, most NPOs (15/26) still felt that social media sites were very time consuming and that they lacked the time to make use of them fully. Consequently, NPO point persons normally only focused on only one or two social media channels, even when they saw other new or alternate social media sites as potentially useful:

As a smaller organization, a Twitter and a Facebook Page is pretty much all we can handle at this moment. I think as far as social media go, that we have to devote our time to quality over quantity when it comes to that. (P26)

Social media management was also limited by financial resources in small NPOs. NPOs cannot afford to hire dedicated staffs to manage social media channels, nor can they hire social media or marketing firms to help with social media management techniques. Many participants (6/26) also complained about Facebook with regard to its new Newsfeed algorithm, which charges NPOs to promote their posts in users’ newsfeeds. Because NPOs did not have the budget for social media advertising, this dramatically limited the organic reach of their Facebook page:

Facebook also has its sharing algorithm which is very different than it used to be a few years ago. And I think that its limits to how many of your supporters see your post. Their promote 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 non-profits, that our pages shouldn't have to be subjected to promote functions. We should be able to have all of our supporters be able to see all of our posts at all times for free. (P18)

Finally, NPOs’ social media channels were constrained by their internal lack of expertise in differentiating their use of different social media sites. Several participants (9/26) noted that they posted the exact same content in both Facebook and Twitter pages 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:

But 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. (P10)

*The Politics of Social Media Management*

Small NPOs had their own organizational policy 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 small NPOs, the decision to adopt social media sites required approval or was decided by higher-level organizations or managers. P22 worked for a local branch of a national NPO, and 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. (P22)

In addition, many participants noted that they had a complex approval process regarding the content strategies and actions in social media sites, to make sure that posts were considered “appropriate” and without any typos, errors, or mistakes. Furthermore, this approval process regarding which features or content strategy to use has greatly influenced their interaction and engagement with social media audiences. For instance, P26 talked about how their 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. (P26)

DISCUSSION AND 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 within-organization 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

The challenges of engaging diverse stakeholders for small organizations involve not just one single social media platform, but a complex social media ecosystem. In this research, we provided evidence of how small NPOs 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 diluted information scattered across other social media platforms. These insights extend prior work examining NPOs’ use of social media in understanding their practices in a single social media platform [10, 13, 34] and discussion about the effectiveness of different social media sites in advocacy [20].

However, using multiple social media sites requires time, a relatively stable workforce, proper collaborations between organizational staff, and expertise to be usable to small organizations. Most small organizations are constrained in their capacities to be able to manage and fully maximize the power of multiple social media platforms. These findings indicate that social media 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 make use of 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 also a need for tools to track interactions with different stakeholders, such as the number of RTs, @s, and conversations with other organizations, reporters, and donors.

Connecting Information, Community, and Action

We found that, like large NPOs, small NPOs 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 NPOs failed to utilize social media for dialogic communication [25] and faced the challenge of “slacktivism” [5], in which participants only take minimum support efforts online without devoting real actions.

In addition, another challenge for small organizations is the lack of accurate feedback regarding their social media performance. Though social media analytic tools exist that aim to measure social media success, 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 analytic assessment tools for public engagement. There is, in particular, an absence of metrics that assess social media’s connection to important outcomes such as fund-raising 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 analytics tools with more situated traces and records of which social media followers are really engaged and motivated to actions, possibly through organizational information system and metadata of volunteers and donors’ information, such as linking to online volunteer recruitment management tools (e.g., VolunteerMatch.com) and fund-raising sites (e.g., giveforward.com), as well as existing volunteer or donor email 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 this paper, we also highlighted several organizational factors that influenced social media use in small organizations’ public engagement practice. It is crucial for HCI researchers to acknowledge these constraints when aiming to design social media tools for small organizations. It is also important pragmatic information for small organizations who want to facilitate their social media sites’ engagement with diverse communities.

We found that there were typically multiple people involved in NPOs’ social media management, either through dividing work between 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 [24]. 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 NPOs, the design of organizational social media platforms should also effectively incorporate the organizational internal workflow with different social media sites, such as drafting, editing, approval, and scheduling posts.

Additionally, 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 sites decision 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 [6] and was found in social media use in other organizational contexts [8, 12]. This suggests that small organizations should identify and resolve tensions between different constituents and coordinate to find the best strategies to use 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, e.g., which type of work should be approved by which group of people, in order to mitigate conflicts between the organizational power and efficiency of social media management.

Limitations

There are several limitations of the current study. First, the study was based on 26 small environmental advocacy NPOs. We did not compare their social media performance (i.e., number of followers) with the general population of US NPOs. This means that the results may not be directly applicable to other small NPOs. Another limitation is that we only interviewed the social media point person in small NPOs, and thus it is mainly the viewpoints of social media point persons that are represented. We did not look, for example, at the viewpoints of managers, activists, or outreach specialists, which could vary based on their power status in the organization [8]; nor did we talk to the recipients of messages, such as volunteers, other organizations, or the general public. Future work should investigate the perceptions of these other stakeholders in order to identify shared and divergent experiences and perceptions.

CONCLUSION

Our study provides a comprehensive analysis of how social media sites are adopted, used, and constrained in small NPOs for their public engagement goals. The small NPOs we examined sought to leverage the availability of multiple social media sites to disseminate information to new audiences, build community with different stakeholders, and mobilize people into action related to advocacy missions. We found that the NPOs’ efforts to use social media sites were not fully successful in initiating conversations and mobilizing actions. Our paper has argued that the design of social media platforms intended to support public engagement must address organizational issues such as the diversity and fluidity of workforce, constraints in time, funding, workforce, and expertise, as well as the need to mitigate organizational politics inconsistent with small organizations’ public engagement goals. The design of social media tools must be carried out with particular sensitivity to the specific needs of small organizations needs to achieve their public engagement goals in the complex and constrained organizational context.

REFERENCES


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