

# **Beyond Facebook and Twitter: The Bond Between Social Media and Nonprofits**

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## Abstract

The adoption and proliferation of social media has deeply affected how nonprofits approach their communications strategies. Social media can be especially useful to small and medium-sized nonprofits that are limited by financial restraints, smaller staff sizes and less visibility in the public eye. It is impossible to predict which social media platforms nonprofits should be using within the next few years. However, there are five characteristics that nonprofits can use to evaluate if a social media platform has the potential to become valuable for their communications and marketing initiatives. Based on theoretical research and interviews with local D.C. communications professionals, these findings aim to offer small and medium-sized nonprofits practical advice that they can use almost immediately.

## Introduction

The adoption and proliferation of social media has deeply affected how nonprofits approach their communications strategies. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are some of the most utilized and researched social media platforms, and many professionals have written articles and books about how nonprofits should use these tools to raise awareness, fundraise, and encourage individuals to become actively engaged with their causes.

Although this body of research provides insights into the opportunities and threats facing large nonprofits, little research has been done to investigate how social media can impact small and medium-sized nonprofits. This gap in academic research is staggering, considering 60.9% of registered 501(c)(3) public charities report very small revenues, totaling \$100,000 or less. The Urban Institute at the National Center for Charitable Statistics further predicts that an additional 19.5% of public charities are so small that they are not even formally registered with the Internal Revenue Service.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that large nonprofits are the minority, yet they receive more scholarly and media attention, leaving smaller nonprofits behind.

If most nonprofits in the United States are small or medium-sized, this disparity in research cannot continue. Small nonprofits are drastically different from large nonprofits, especially since these small organizations have much smaller annual budgets, fewer staff and less visibility in the public eye. For these reasons, it is not surprising that smaller organizations prefer low-cost channels like email and social networking sites, while larger nonprofits are more likely to use more expensive channels like paid advertising, phone banks and print.<sup>2</sup>

According to Georgette Dumont from the University of Northern Florida, large nonprofits are far more adept in adopting social media tools than small nonprofits. Large nonprofits are quicker to adopt Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and are more likely to use new social media tools in the future than their smaller counterparts. Indeed, while this study shows that especially small nonprofits are adopting social media, large nonprofits are doing so at a much faster pace.<sup>3</sup>

To better serve their communities, small and medium-sized nonprofit organizations are always looking for ways to better serve the public, and social media is tool with serious potential. For example, nonprofit organizations may consider using social media to increase the number of volunteers, gather more items for clothing and food drives, or collect signatures for a public awareness campaign. And this is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the opportunities available at their fingertips.

It is crucial to close the gap the research gap regarding how large and small nonprofits use social media. Moreover, any social media recommendations generated in such research are tailored to

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<sup>1</sup> "Registered Nonprofit Organizations by Level of Total Revenue," (August 2012.) The Urban Institute, National Center for Charitable Statistics.

<sup>2</sup> 2012 Nonprofit Communications Trends Report. 2012. <<http://www.nonprofitmarketingguide.com/resources/book/2012-nonprofit-communications-trends-report/>>

<sup>3</sup> Georgette E. Dumont. 2010. " Nonprofit Engagement of Social Networks." In 2010 Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) conference, Alexandria, VA, November 18-20, 2010. University of North Florida.

the specific needs of these organizations. There is no cookie-cutter solutions to the problems facing small nonprofits, and therefore any understanding of social media must be equally dynamic.

### Defining Key Terms

The word “nonprofit” refers to an extremely wide variety of organizations ranging from religious institutions, private universities, lobbying groups, and well-known charities like the Red Cross and the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Nonprofits come in all shapes and sizes, and according to *Marketing for Non-Profit Organizations* by David L. Rados, “Financial gain says nothing about an organization’s status. The key to being a nonprofit is motive.”<sup>4</sup> A nonprofit seeks to fulfill its mission statement by focusing on a target issue or cause to promote social change. The target issue (e.g., public health, literacy, etc.) may differ for each particular nonprofit, but the importance of maintaining a mission statement is a universal goal for nonprofits of any size.

For the purpose of this study, the researchers focused on 501(c)(3) organizations as defined by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). More specifically, the researchers focused on public-serving organizations that must raise funds to fulfill their mission statements and serve people who consume their products and services.<sup>5</sup>

“Small” nonprofits are those that earn between \$5,000 and \$200,000 in gross receipts per year, and “medium” nonprofits are those that earn between \$200,000 and \$500,000 in gross receipts per year, in accordance to guidelines set by the IRS.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, small and medium-sized nonprofits have a full-time, paid staff of twenty-five employees or fewer.<sup>7</sup>

Technologically, the researchers will focus on nonprofits that have a firmly established Web 1.0 presence (i.e., non-interactive website), but are still developing their Web 2.0 and 3.0 presences (i.e., social and mobile, respectively).<sup>8</sup> Web 2.0 can be described as “a system that breaks with the old model of centralized Web sites and moves the power of the Web/Internet to the desktop.”<sup>9</sup> This transition greatly impacted the end users of the Internet, allowing them to interact with organizations online rather than receiving information from a one-way method of communication. It changed the way people used the Internet and interacted with organizations.

Another key term worth defining within the scope of this study is “social media.” Researchers Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenli define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that

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<sup>4</sup> David L. Rados (1996). *Marketing for Non-Profit Organizations*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Form 990 Series - Which Forms Do Exempt Organizations File?” last modified August 21, 2012. The Internal Revenue Service. [http://www.irs.gov/Charities-&-Non-Profits/Form-990-Series-Which-Forms-Do-Exempt-Organizations-File%3F-\(Filing-Phase-In\)](http://www.irs.gov/Charities-&-Non-Profits/Form-990-Series-Which-Forms-Do-Exempt-Organizations-File%3F-(Filing-Phase-In)).

<sup>7</sup> “2010 Nonprofit Compensation Survey.” Watkins Uiberall. 2010, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Hana S. Noor and John Allen Hendricks, *Social Media: Usage and Impact* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 161.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.”<sup>10</sup> The rise of Web 2.0 built on the two-way communication model that allowed organizations and users to interact, and social media further built on this model to actively involve users in the creation of content.

Social media is a group of Internet-based applications that can take many forms. Kaplan and Haenlein note that six different types of social media exist: “collaborative projects, blogs and microblogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds.”<sup>11</sup> Within the scope of this research project, the social media being studied will fall under three of the six categories: blogs and microblogs, content communities, and social networking sites.

### The Complicated Roles of Facebook and Twitter

There are thousands of social media websites, platforms, and tools, but today’s social media would not exist if it was not for the proliferation of Facebook and Twitter. In 2012, almost all nonprofits (98%) have a social media presence on at least one platform and over 85% of these organizations have at least one presence on Facebook.<sup>12</sup> Seventy-two percent of all nonprofits also have at least one profile on Twitter.<sup>13</sup> These numbers are impressive by any standard, but it is possible that Facebook and Twitter are not helping nonprofits fully meet their organizational goals.

Consider this—55% of nonprofit organizations said in a 2011 poll that the main purpose of their social networking efforts was fundraising, and about the same percentage of organizations listed “growing fundraising” as one of their top organizational goals in the next year.<sup>14</sup> However, more than half of nonprofit organizations said they were not fundraising on Facebook, and that the main point of their Facebook advertising efforts was to increase awareness and promote non-financial calls-to-action (e.g. volunteer, sign a petition, make a pledge, etc.).<sup>15</sup>

Thus, an interesting pattern emerges. Eighty percent of nonprofits claim that Facebook is “a very or somewhat important communications tool,”<sup>16</sup> but the research suggests that fundraising, while important to the organization’s mission, is not being tackled on Facebook as would be expected. A similar pattern emerges on Twitter as well.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, there are thousands, if not millions, of voices on these major social websites competing for the user’s attention. In a space that is so crowded, it can be hard for small and medium-sized nonprofits to stand out, especially since these organizations are championing

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<sup>10</sup> Kaplan Andreas M., Haenlein Michael, (2010), Users of the world, Unite! The Challenge and Opportunities of Social Media, *Business Horizons*, Vol. 53, Issue 1 (page 61).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “2012 Nonprofit Communications Trends Report.” 2012. EcoScribe Communications & Nonprofit Marketing Guide.com, 25-26.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “4th Annual Nonprofit Social Network Benchmark Report” 2012. Blackbaud, NTEN & Common Knowledge, 13-17.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

social issues that might not be well-known to the general public. In the words of Rick Cohen, the Director of Communications for the National Council of Nonprofits, “Facebook and Twitter continue to pose a challenge to smaller nonprofits because they have been a great benefit to larger organizations where people know those nonprofits already.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, although well-known social media sites like Facebook and Twitter will continue to be major players in online communications, they may not be equipped to fully meet the needs of small and medium-sized nonprofits. This is not to say that Facebook and Twitter are unnecessary or detrimental to these nonprofits, but rather, that is a lot of potential for other social media websites to offer unique opportunities for these organizations as well.

### Original Research Questions

Originally, there were two research questions. The first asked, how are current popular social media tools falling short in helping small and medium-sized nonprofits achieve their organizational goals? The second question asked, what lesser-known, up-and-coming social media tools and mobile applications could nonprofits be using to supplement or substitute current Web 2.0 initiatives?

The original end product was envisioned as a practical handbook with concrete recommendations about particular social media tools and platforms that nonprofits could utilize almost immediately. This handbook would have named specific applications, tools and platforms in order to reduce research time for nonprofits and ease their transition into a new social media space. Since research supports the assertion that nonprofits often do not have the time or resources to look into new social media endeavors, this handbook would have been helpful in addressing these shortcomings.

However, once research was underway, the researchers discovered a different need for nonprofits and shifted the project goals and the format of the end product accordingly. Additionally, the depth and scope of the research shifted once the project began. The researchers found that books, journals and scholarly articles often were outdated and not directly related to the particular issue at hand. This prompted the research to broaden and include more personal interviews that complemented the theoretical research. These two forms of methodology will be addressed later in the paper.

Ultimately, the researchers had two main goals in mind throughout the entire research process. First, the researchers wanted to emphasize the importance of concrete recommendations that nonprofits could use right away. Second, the researchers wanted to focus on real-world research that would present information from many points of view.

### Methodology

The methodology for this project consists of two distinct types: theoretical research and personal interviews. It was necessary to use these two methods of research in order to discover a dynamic

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<sup>18</sup> Rick Cohen. Interviewed by Ida Rosenthal and Rachel C. White. Washington D.C., November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

view of the issue at hand. Each method allowed for a comparison between theory and real-world applications.

The research for this project began with scholarly sources found at the American University Bender Library as well as through internet journal publications. While this research may have provided some insight as to nonprofits and social media, it was still not enough to fully satisfy the scope of this project. In fact, many problems quickly arose from this research.

One problem that the scholarly research illustrated was that the information provided was outdated. Many of the publications were written in the early 2000s—some were even written in the late 1900s. This showed that the scholarly research lacked up-to-date information that could be applied to the real world. Even though some of the scholarly research was written in 2011, the quick nature of social media and technological advancements, made it less useful.

The research also found had too broad of a focus to be accurately applied to this project. Much of the scholarly research focused either on nonprofits or on social media, and rarely were the two topics discussed in one source. The researchers desired a cohesive, truthful analysis of small to medium-sized nonprofits and their social media and this type of research did not provide enough analysis on the particular problem at hand. Additionally, the scholarly research seldom made the distinction between small to medium-sized nonprofits and large nonprofits. Since this clarification was crucial to the focus of this particular study, the scholarly research was not relevant enough to draw substantial conclusions.

The last problem with scholarly research was that it often made recommendations that would not offer value to professionals working in small and medium-sized nonprofits. Although the scholar research was helpful in reinforcing common knowledge about social media, the recommendations presented in these sources were not applicable to different types of nonprofits. For example, many sources focused on large nonprofits, presenting few alternatives for organizations with a much smaller budget.

Additionally, recommendations about which social media sites or tools to use were often outdated. This was a big problem because it meant that the scholarly research would have a short shelf life since the advice was beneficial for only a short amount of time. Since this study aimed to provide small to medium-sized nonprofits with advice that would last a longer amount of time, the scholarly research was not particularly helpful in that regard.

Traditional research had many problems, but it provided very solid background information regarding statistics and general trends involving social media and nonprofits. However, the researchers acknowledged that a second type of research, personal interviews, would be needed in order to better understand how small and medium-sized nonprofits used social media.

Personal interviews were necessary for this study because it allowed the researchers to see many different perspectives on the issue at hand. By talking with communications professionals in the local DC area, the researchers were able to get a sense of nonprofits' online needs as well as the amount of time and effort professionals put into social media. The interviews also gave clarification on what scholarly research had indicated—instead of reading about it, the

researchers were able to get personal stories from interviewees that corroborated evidence found in theoretical research.

The personal interviews were created and executed by the researchers. They wrote the questions and also asked the questions. For more information regarding the exact questions asked for this study, please refer to the Appendix.\*

The manner in which interviewees were chosen was through the creation of a spreadsheet of multiple organizations with contact information. Three different types of organizations were focused on for the interviews. The researchers interviewed people from nonprofits, social media vendors and advisory organizations. The social media vendors are businesses that provide a social media tool or platform. The advisory organizations are nonprofits themselves, but they also seek to help other nonprofits by providing advice and recommendations for the usage of social media. Interviewing people from different types of organizations helped give a well-rounded perspective to how nonprofits work with social media and how they *could be* working with social media.

The researchers interviewed eight different people:

*Nonprofits*—Kim Lyons-Briley (Martha’s Table), Laura Whiston (A Wider Circle) and Kate Akalonu (N Street Village)

*Social Media Vendors*—Eric Rardin (Care2), Lotika Gulvadi (Rally.org) and Ifdy Perez (Razoo)

*Advisory Organizations*—Jenna Sauber (The Case Foundation) and Rick Cohen (National Council of Nonprofits)

The interviewing process began on Friday, November 8 and continued through Tuesday, November 20. Six of the 8 interviews took place over the phone, 2 were in-person interviews. In each case, a disclaimer was read before the interview began telling interviewees that if they were uncomfortable answering a question they had no obligation to answer. This disclaimer can be found in the Appendix.\*

Most of the interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes, but some went as long as 35 minutes. The researchers took notes via laptop during the interviews and were able to grab exact quotes through this method. After all the research was completed, the researchers asked the interviewees for their explicit permission to use particular quotes in the final report.

### A Change in Focus

After the theoretical research and interviews were complete, the researchers felt compelled to change the direction of their final product, given the new insights and information. In the interviews specifically, one theme was present in almost every conversation.

Nonprofits, advisory organizations and social media vendors alike said that it is very difficult to tell which social media platform is going to be important in one year, five years, or even a decade from now. Some even mentioned that the “next big thing” might not even exist yet. Kate



Akalonu, Communications and Community Engagement Associate from N Street Village, said, “It’s so hard to know [what will happen in five years]. Which platforms will still be relevant? Which will still exist?...I can’t say that I know what happens next.”<sup>19</sup> Additionally, Eric Rardin, the Senior Business Development Director at Care2.com, admitted that the future format of social media is “almost impossible to know.”<sup>20</sup>

If these communications professionals were unsure about the future social media platforms, the researchers wondered if the original handbook would actually offer something valuable to small and medium-sized nonprofits. Moreover, it would be imprudent to make recommendations about which social media platforms to use if those recommendations would become obsolete within the next few years.

Thus, the researchers decided to change direction and think of broader, concrete characteristics that any potential social media tool must have in order to be useful to the nonprofit. This “checklist” of characteristics will allow nonprofits to identify whether a platform they are looking at has the potential to help them achieve their organizational goals. In the long-run, these characteristics will be more durable recommendations than a list of tools that may or may not exist in the future.

Originally, the researchers set out to create a list of social media websites and mobile applications that small and medium-sized nonprofits could use right away. After many interviews and through an extensive examination of books and scholarly journals, the researchers decided not to tackle mobile applications in the final product.

None of the interviewees in this study had built or maintained a native mobile app for their organization, and moreover, no one seemed to be interested in using mobile applications in the near future, mainly for financial reasons and other cost considerations. Thus, although mobile applications will play an important role in the digital landscape in the years to come, the researchers in this study thought it was slightly premature to discuss the characteristics of potential mobile applications for small and medium-sized nonprofits at this time.

### Five Characteristics

Ultimately, the researchers concluded that there are five characteristics that can be used to evaluate if a social media platform has potential for a nonprofit. The social media platform must (1) be free, (2) connected to the larger digital ecosystem, (3) allow the nonprofit to build a community, (4) encourage strong storytelling, and (5) promote involvement with the nonprofit both online and offline. Since each nonprofit is unique, it is possible that some of these characteristics will be more influential than others, depending on what kind of service the nonprofit is trying to provide its community. By providing this “checklist” of features, the researchers hope to save communications professionals who work in nonprofit organizations time, energy, and resources.

#### *1. The main features must be free.*

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<sup>19</sup> Kate Akalonu. Interviewed by Ida Rosenthal. Washington D.C., November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Rardin. Interviewed by Ida Rosenthal. Washington D.C., November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

One of the most widespread preconceptions about social media is that these tools are inexpensive, and therefore, nonprofits jump at the chance to use them. This viewpoint is accurate to some extent, but also misleading. For small and medium-sized nonprofits, the main features of social media platforms cannot be “inexpensive”—they must be entirely free. This seems drastic until one examines the true fiscal state of social media in a small nonprofit’s annual budget.

According to the 4th Annual Nonprofit Social Network Benchmark Report, 46% of small and medium-sized nonprofits do not allocate a single cent in their budget for social media initiatives (excluding salary costs). Another 28% of nonprofits allocated less than a paltry \$10,000. Fifty-two percent of small and medium-sized nonprofits think that the biggest reason they are not present on a social media platform is “no budget or staff.”<sup>21</sup>

All of the nonprofits the researchers interviewed said that they did not spend money on social media in the last year, other than the salaries for the people who work on maintaining and curating the content on these platforms. In fact, many of the interviewees viewed the time and energy to work with social media as the true “cost” of using these platforms.

Kim Lyons-Briley, the Assistant Director of Development at Martha’s Table, stated, “It’s a lot of work to keep up with both Facebook and Twitter. It’s difficult to create new content all the time, especially since we don’t know if it’s going to connect to people.”<sup>22</sup> Laura Whiston, the In-Kind Donations Coordinator at A Wider Circle, describes how her organization tries to economize resources when it comes to social media: “For small nonprofits, hiring one particular person to work with social media isn’t feasible, so people do many things at once. Most people that work here also chip in.”<sup>23</sup>

Akalonu’s social media duties are only one of her many responsibilities, including marketing, photo editing, video editing, graphic design, third party outreach and other special projects.<sup>24</sup> Small and medium-sized nonprofits do not set aside money specifically for social media, and it is up to the hardworking professionals in these organizations to find the time, energy and resources to use these platforms in addition to their already long list of duties.

There are a couple clarifications to this rule. First, it is important to note that the main features of a social media website should be free, but that does not mean additional features must be free as well. Although the interviewees in this study did not have the funds to buy anything on these platforms (e.g., Facebook advertising or promoted tweets), other nonprofits may want to have these options at their disposal.

Second, although it costs money to purchase a personalized domain name on many blogging platforms, these costs should be considered web maintenance fees rather than the true cost of using the blogging platform itself. If, for instance, the blogging platform started charging users fees for the ability to post an article or photo, then it would be considered a violation of this rule

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<sup>21</sup> “4th Annual Nonprofit Social Network Benchmark Report 2012,” 19.

<sup>22</sup> Kim Lyons-Briley. Interviewed by Ida Rosenthal. Washington D.C., November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Laura Whiston. Interviewed by Rachel C White. Washington D.C., November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Kate Akalonu. Interview.

and the researchers would recommend that small nonprofits avoid this tool. Several of the interviewees noted that their organizations spent money on web maintenance, but they did not view these fees as part of the “cost” of social media.<sup>25,26</sup>

## *2. The platform must be connected to the digital ecosystem.*

Traditionally, the word “ecosystem” refers to a scientific concept in which a community of living organisms cohabitates with nonliving components in their environment. By extension, a digital ecosystem is defined as “a community of digital devices and their environment functioning as a whole.”<sup>27</sup> Experts further describe digital ecosystems as the intersection of the information technology (IT), telecommunications, media and entertainment industries.<sup>28</sup>

Digital ecosystems make it easier for users to transfer information between several devices, as well as websites.<sup>29</sup> Today, users expect a lot of flexibility in how they can use technology. In 2011, 90% of people reported using several devices when accomplishing a goal.<sup>30</sup> Whether they are using smartphones, personal computers, tablets or television, users are accessing these devices to do a variety of tasks, including planning trips, searching for information, shopping online, or browsing the Internet.<sup>31</sup>

For small and medium-sized nonprofits, it is important that any new social media initiative be easily compatible with the organization’s preexisting social media presences, blog and website. Since resources are limited, staff in nonprofit organizations are cautious and they want to make sure the platforms they invest in are going to be reliable, accessible and intuitive to use.

Smaller nonprofits, by their own admittance, are not trailblazers in the social media space. According to Akalonu, “We don’t have to be trendsetters like the World Wildlife Federations and Atlas Corps who are the first groups to use [new tools like Pinterest] and use them well.”<sup>32</sup> Instead, it is worth spending the time to focus “on utilizing a few tools...and using those tools well.”<sup>33</sup>

Every nonprofit works at its own pace when deciding which social media platforms to use, but the process is very gradual. Jenna Sauber, the Digital Marketing and Communications Manager at The Case Foundation, states, “We are still seeing people ask about Facebook and Twitter but they’re just starting to ask about being on other newer platforms. It’s different for every group,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Rick Cohen, Interview.

<sup>27</sup> Ben Bjarin. "Why It's All About the Digital Ecosystem." TechPinions. (2011). <http://techpinions.com/why-its-all-about-the-ecosystem/4567>.

<sup>28</sup> "Digital Ecosystem Convergence between IT, Telecoms, Media and Entertainment." (2012). World Economic Forum. [www.weforum.org/reports/digital-ecosystem-convergence-between-it-telecoms-media-and-entertainment-scenarios-2015](http://www.weforum.org/reports/digital-ecosystem-convergence-between-it-telecoms-media-and-entertainment-scenarios-2015).

<sup>29</sup> Ben Bjarin. "Why It's All About the Digital Ecosystem." TechPinions. (2011).

<sup>30</sup> "Navigating the new multi-screen world: Insights show how consumers use different devices together." (2012). Google Mobile Ads Blog. <http://googlemobileads.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/navigating-new-multi-screen-world.html>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Kate Akalonu. Interview.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

no black or white answer.”<sup>34</sup> Facing limited resources, nonprofits are restrained when choosing whether or not to invest time and energy into a new social media platform. Thus, they want to rest assured that if they do invest, they can hit the ground running with a platform that is already connected to their existing digital communications. If a platform is too cumbersome to incorporate, it is not worth it.

### *3. The platform must promote strong storytelling.*

The third important characteristic on the checklist is that the social media platform must encourage storytelling. According to Susanne Smith, the president of Social Impact Architects, stories are so important because “they help us break through the clutter of the 3,000 messages we’re bombarded with each day.”<sup>35</sup> In fact, a term has been assigned to the increased amount of messages in today’s advertising society—marketing clutter. This term, defined by *Marketing Made Simple*, “refers to the very high volume of advertising messages that the average consumer is exposed to on a daily basis.”<sup>36</sup>

This was not always the case. Jay Walker-Smith claimed in the Yankelovich Consumer Report, “We’ve gone from being exposed to about 500 ads a day back in the 1970s to as many as 5,000 a day today.”<sup>37</sup> This increase has left users unable to sort through all the information to get to what matters to them the most. Users are experiencing information overload. Akalonu, echoed this information overload theory when she stated, “The social media space is really noisy and there are a lot of stories.”<sup>38</sup>

In order to break through the clutter to be noticed, organizations must utilize storytelling. Smith acknowledges that recent brain studies when she asserts that users “remember things when they’re in a storytelling format two to seven times more than...just text alone.”<sup>39</sup> Nonprofits need to have their organization’s name and message remembered, so telling a story would greatly increase the nonprofit achieve this goal. In fact, researchers Smith recommend that organizations “provide information on the premise that consumers are more likely to talk about companies and products when they feel they know a lot about them.”<sup>40</sup> This knowledge of the organization or the organization’s mission can easily be increased through storytelling tactics.

In fact, Smith promotes the idea that small to medium-sized nonprofits should communicate the organization’s own ‘story’ to users through storytelling. She specifically recommends that these nonprofits should “be a collector of stories” in order to best distribute the organization’s ideals and examples to users.<sup>41</sup> Cohen agreed with this notion of demonstrating the impact of the

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<sup>34</sup> Jenna Sauber. Interview by Rachel C. White. Personal Interview. Washington D.C., November, 14th, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> JD Lasica. "How nonprofits should be using storytelling." Socialbrite. June 2010. <<http://www.socialbrite.org/2010/06/01/how-nonprofits-should-be-using-storytelling/>>

<sup>36</sup> "Marketing clutter - How to get noticed." 2009. Marketing Made Simple. <http://www.marketing-made-simple.com/articles/promotional-clutter.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Caitlin A. Johnson. "Cutting Through Advertising Clutter." December 2009. CBS News. [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-3445\\_162-2015684.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-3445_162-2015684.html).

<sup>38</sup> Kate Akalonu. Interview.

<sup>39</sup> JD Lasica. "How nonprofits should be using storytelling." Socialbrite. June 2010.

<sup>40</sup> John Allen Hendricks and Hanna S Noor. (10 November 2011). *Social Media Usage and Impact*, 149.

<sup>41</sup> JD Lasica. "How nonprofits should be using storytelling." Socialbrite. June 2010.

nonprofit: “A great way of doing [this] is to show your nonprofit in action and show how you’re serving the people in communities.”<sup>42</sup>

The act of telling stories is not a foreign concept to nonprofits. Many utilize this already with their online communications. Whiston claimed that her organization’s “hope is to tell peoples’ stories to inspire people to give, not explicitly asking for money.”

Research shows that storytelling is effective at holding peoples’ attention and forming memories. Personal interviews reaffirm that nonprofits must engage in storytelling often in order to gain attention for the organizations themselves or the target issues the organizations address. Nonprofits need a social media tool or platform that encourages storytelling in order to get their message across. Akalonu from N Street Village claimed that “social media puts the power back in the story” and that she hopes it continues.<sup>43</sup>

A social media platform or tool must allow stronger stories to receive more attention. By promoting a less-than-spectacular story to the top of the pack, a social media platform will not allow nonprofits to engage users effectively. Users will discover that they must dig through lots of information in order to get to the best quality. Users want quick information and do not want to go through this tedious process.

In order for a social media platform or tool to encourage storytelling, it must embody three important characteristics: (1) It must allow for the strongest story to rise to the top (2) It needs to allow for strong visuals and (3) It needs to have a non-cluttered, easy-to-follow layout.

There are several mechanisms that a social media platform may have if it wants to encourage storytelling. One way a social media platform can encourage stronger stories to succeed is to allow for users to judge the stories, voting them up or down a particular page (e.g. Digg, Reddit). Stronger stories would move to the top whereas weaker stories would sink to the bottom.

Another way the stronger story could succeed is if user feedback is taken into the social media platform’s algorithm about what to show users (e.g. Facebook). This algorithm would then be influenced by users’ interaction with the story. The more interaction and feedback, the higher the story rises based on the algorithm. This self-perpetuating cycle would reward strong stories and leave weak stories behind.

The next characteristic a social media platform must have is the ability to showcase strong visuals. Images are very useful for nonprofits because it allows they allow organization to tell a story through pictures. Pictures are immensely beneficial to nonprofits because they are easily tied with that formation of emotions and memories. According to Nonprofit Hub, “The value of visual storytelling on social media relates to the very nature of nonprofits. Nonprofits are distinct from for-profits because the cause is inherently emotional.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Rick Cohen. Interview.

<sup>43</sup> Kate Akalonu. Interview.

<sup>44</sup> Havlat, Jill. (2012) “Visual Storytelling on Social Media—Get the Picture?” Nonprofit Hub. <http://www.nonprofithub.org/featured/visual-storytelling-on-social-mediaget-the-picture/>

Users can also share images easily. Ifdy Perez stated in an article from Razoo.com, “Photos are one of the most shared content on social media, so it’s become important for organizations to adapt and show more images in order to bring about more engagement—likes, comments, sharing—on their social networks.”<sup>45</sup> A social media platform or tool must be able to showcase pictures in a visually stimulating way, with clear colors and strong image clarity.

The third characteristic a social media platform must have is a non-cluttered, easy-to-follow layout. As noted before, clutter is difficult for users to cut through in order to find the best quality information. In fact, Social Media Explorer states, “Too many page elements make it difficult for a visitor to figure out what to focus on. Your calls-to-action get lost in the chaos.”<sup>46</sup> A page or tool layout must be simple and easy to read in order for visitors to access information.

The social media platform or tool must continue to remain non-cluttered even as more widgets and links become relevant. Having too much information available on a page may overwhelm a visitor and discourage the user from using the platform. A nonprofit wants to grab visitors’ attention and keep it on its message and organization. In order to do this, the social media platform or tool must provide the user with a positive aesthetic. This can be identified on a social media platform or tool easily—it should have a decent amount of empty space, clear visuals, not too many links or other distractions and organized content.

#### *4. The platform must encourage the formation of communities.*

The ability for a social media platform or tool to allow the natural formation of communities is another crucial characteristic for nonprofits to consider. The notion of community has existed for many years; however, the concept of a virtual community is relatively new. Jenny Preece wrote in her article “Online Communities: Design, Theory, and Practice” that “in the online world, social interactions no longer have to be face-to-face or based on proximity, instead they can be with literally anyone anywhere.”<sup>47</sup> Social media has encouraged this shift in definition because it allows anyone, regardless of geographical location, to interact with others who have similar interests. Ifdy Perez, a community manager at Razoo, agreed with this notion, stating, “It used to be that people were very segmented, but now the Internet—specifically social networks—help bring us together.”<sup>48</sup> Users interested in a topic can now seek out others with similar passions without having to leave their computers.

The formation of an online community around a nonprofit’s target issue is critical because it strengthens the bond between the nonprofit and its followers. In the words of social media expert Allison Fine, “Creating opportunities for meaningful participation is a critical part of

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<sup>45</sup> Perez, Ifdy. (2012). “6 Images Every Nonprofit Can Capture.” Inspiring Generosity. <http://social.razoo.com/2012/06/6-images-every-nonprofit-can-capture/>

<sup>46</sup> Kat French. (2012). “Zen and the Art of Website Conversion.” Social Media Explorer. [www.socialmediaexplorer.com/search-engine-marketing/zen-and-the-art-of-website-conversion/](http://www.socialmediaexplorer.com/search-engine-marketing/zen-and-the-art-of-website-conversion/)

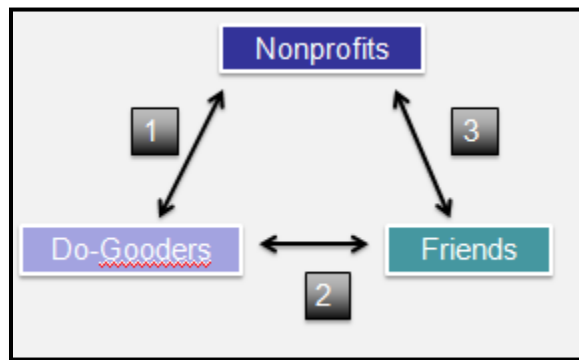
<sup>47</sup> J. Preece and D. Maloney-Krichmar, (2005). “Online communities: Design, theory, and practice.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(4). <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue4/preece.html>

<sup>48</sup> Ifdy Perez. Interview by Ida Rosenthal. Personal Interview. Washington D.C., November, 15th, 2012.

creating a sense of community and common bonds for action between and among participants”<sup>49</sup>  
 This meaningful participation makes users feel like they are making a difference.  
 In order to build and sustain an online community, a nonprofit should understand how to use social media platforms and tools to its advantage. The tool or platform must allow for a nonprofit to have continual outreach with its dedicated audience in addition to having the opportunity to expand its audience.

In other words, new audiences must be able to be recruited through the social media platform or tool. One way to do this is for the platform or tool to share with others when friends interact with nonprofits. An example of this phenomenon can be found on Facebook: Cohen, from the National Council of Nonprofits, stated, “I think it does broaden the potential donor base when you see that one of your friends has liked a certain group on Facebook. You may not have known about it before and you’ll go investigate it and follow up on it yourself.”<sup>50</sup>

**Figure 1:** This illustration shows how a nonprofit can expand its supporter base through the ability of a social media platform to share content.



Facebook is only one example of how a social media platform that can increase a nonprofit’s community. In fact, one must keep in mind that different methods of increasing a community can exist. Existing social media platforms may build community in an entirely different way than how up-and-coming platforms will tackle this task. Nonprofits need to keep their eyes open for these potential developments.

##### *5. The platform must facilitate both online and offline involvement.*

A social media platform or tool must allow nonprofits to usher users through the ladder of engagement. According to social media expert Beth Kanter, the ladder of engagement is a “scaffolding arranged by the depth of the relationship between the user and the organization.”<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Fine, Allison. (29 September 2006). *Momentum: Igniting Social Change in the Connected Age.*, 22

<sup>50</sup> Rick Cohen, Interview.

<sup>51</sup> Beth Kanter. (2009) "What is your nonprofit supporter’s decision journey in age of information overload?" Beth Kanter's Blog. <http://www.bethkanter.org/journeys/>

At the bottom of the ladder, users are not aware of the organization itself or the organization's target issue. Users can climb the ladder by becoming aware of the organization and its target issues. As user awareness climbs, the willingness for the user to participate with the organization online increases. The higher up the ladder users climb, the more likely the user is to engage with the organization. At the top of the ladder is the highest level of engagement, in users donate, volunteer or attend events for the nonprofits.

Rardin stated that his organization knows "that a lot of people who start by doing something online, continue to more traditional forms of engagement."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Sauber from The Case Foundation agrees, saying that users see the nonprofit post something online "and then they see the site and then a newsletter and then they take action. It's expected to get them to take little steps."<sup>53</sup> This can increase the nonprofit's size and influence overall.

While it may seem trivial to encourage one person to "simply" become aware of an issue and to then take action, many individuals acknowledge the potential of this collective power. Rardin continued, claiming, "You start on that first step on the ladder of engagement, but when you multiply that by millions of people, that leads to lots of social change."<sup>54</sup>

The social media platform or tool must be able to raise awareness for users at the bottom of the ladder of engagement. According to *Social Media Usage and Impact*, the combination of one and two-way communication with audience members to raise awareness will become prevalent in nonprofits "because social media marketing continues to extend from the marketing department to nearly every aspect of a company's business."<sup>55</sup> This integrated marketing approach will be an important facet to consider when formulating a nonprofit's awareness campaign. Once awareness of an issue is raised, the nonprofit may begin to focus on involving audience members in the organization, therefore increasing engagement with the nonprofit.

One problem with the rise of social media is the simultaneous rise of the fear regarding "slacktivism." According to Foreign Policy's Net Effect blog, slacktivism refers to "feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact. It gives those who participate in campaigns an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a group online."<sup>56</sup> By allowing users to receive the good feeling of "doing something" online without having really contributed to a cause, social media could possibly endanger real activism. Many critics worry that connecting online is passive and will not lead to real change or impact. Thus, the most useful social media platforms for a small to medium-sized nonprofit must be able to connect from online action to offline action.

### Research Limitations

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<sup>52</sup> Eric Rardin. Interview.

<sup>53</sup> Kate Akalonu. Interview by Ida Rosenthal. Personal Interview. Washington D.C., November, 15th, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> John Allen Hendricks and Hanna S Noor Al-Deen. *Social Media: Usage and Impact*, 161

<sup>56</sup> Morozov, Evgeny. "The brave new world of slacktivism." Foreign Policy's Net Effect Blog. May 2009. <[http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/the\\_brave\\_new\\_world\\_of\\_slacktivism](http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/the_brave_new_world_of_slacktivism)>



While this study may have demonstrated key characteristics of effective social media platforms and tools that small to medium-sized nonprofits should look for, there are still many limits of this particular study that must be noted.

First, the scholarly research was limited to what the researchers could find in the American University Bender Library and Washington Research Library Consortium (WRLC). Because of this, the scope of the research could be construed as relatively narrow. Moreover, the personal interviews were mostly located in one city, Washington, D.C., and therefore the findings cannot be applied to all cities. Additionally, the sample size was small and the researchers could only speak to interviewees who wanted to participate in the study. Lastly, due to time restrictions, the researchers could not interview professionals from every type of service-providing nonprofit (e.g., soup kitchen, youth mentoring, environmental groups, etc.), and therefore, this may have skewed the results.

### The Future of Social Media

The ability of social media to affect social change specifically is exciting and rife with possibility. As millions of people continue to use social media websites “the role of social media in social change is only going to increase because that’s where people are.”<sup>57</sup>

However, it is unclear exactly where people will converge to partake in social action. As our interviewees pointed out, it is impossible to predict what websites and platforms are going to be popular five years from now, let alone the distant future. Cohen predicted that nonprofits would go “further away from Facebook as it gets more complicated” and that video will be an important medium.<sup>58</sup> Sauber added that crowdsourcing would grow in popularity because “it’s a combination of the individual and the community coming together to make change.”<sup>59</sup>

But social media is still facing growing pains: “The big thing that’s been missing from a lot of social networking is the personal touch and whatever social media network is able to make it more personal again will be the future. People miss the more face-to-face interaction.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, many nonprofits are still concerned about the fear of slacktivism, or more broadly, that online engagement does not translate into live action. “There’s still a disconnect between mind and body,” said Lyons-Briley, “People can look at something and not act on it, which is where I think there is potential to change.”<sup>61</sup>

In short, the future of social media has lots of potential, but there are many obstacles that must be addressed. Nonprofits can benefit from the low financial costs of using social media, but time and other resources are finite, making the use of social media a challenge focused on quality rather than quantity. No one knows what will be the “next big thing,” but whatever happens, it is clear that social media does have the capacity to bring people together and help nonprofits better serve their communities.

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<sup>57</sup> Eric Rardin. Interview.

<sup>58</sup> Rick Cohen. Interview.

<sup>59</sup> Jenna Sauber. Interview.

<sup>60</sup> Rick Cohen. Interview.

<sup>61</sup> Kimberly Lyons-Briley. Interview.

## Conclusion

In most of the literature and research regarding the relationship between social media and nonprofits, large organizations receive much more attention than smaller ones, even though small and medium-sized organizations comprise a clear majority of the total nonprofits in the United States. Moreover, books and scholarly articles tend to become outdated fairly quickly, and therefore, personal interviews with professionals who work at small nonprofits can offer unique, real-world insights. It is almost impossible to predict which social media platforms will be useful to nonprofits in the immediate future, but there are several characteristics that a platform must have if it has potential to be used by small and medium-sized nonprofits.

First, the main features on the social media platform must be free, although additional features can cost a little bit of money. Second, the platform must already be connected in the digital ecosystem, making it easy for nonprofits to incorporate the new tool into their existing communications initiatives. Third, social media websites must allow the nonprofits to tell a story and then reward the strongest stories. Fourth, a potential platform must allow the nonprofits to build communities between themselves, do-gooders who are actively involved in their cause, and the do-gooders' friends. Lastly, a social media website must encourage users to become involved both online and offline.

Not every nonprofit will value each of these characteristics equally. However, the researchers hope that by putting these qualities in a checklist, nonprofits can more systematically evaluate if a social media platform has potential for their organization.

It can be easy to get caught up in the potential and excitement of social media, but it is important to remember that the mission statement of the nonprofit always comes first. Nonprofits exist to serve their communities and any social media initiative must always uphold that purpose. Social media is only one part of an effective integrated marketing communications strategy, and along with traditional marketing techniques, it has the ability to impact to affect many people and help change lives.

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## **Appendix**

### Interview Questions for Vendors

- 1.) Can you tell me about your job responsibilities? And more broadly, the responsibilities of the department you work in?
- 2.) What are the main goals your social media platform/tool is trying to achieve?
- 3.) Who would you say are the target audiences of your social media platform/tool?
- 4.) In your opinion, what does “success” look like for people and organizations using your website?
- 5.) Can you tell me about an example of person or organization that had great success using your social media platform/tool?
- 6.) What would you say to someone who thinks that social media enables people to feel good about themselves when they sign an online petition or change their avatar, but this doesn’t necessarily encourage real active social change?
- 7.) In your opinion, how is your social media platform/tool different from today’s more mainstream social media websites like Facebook and Twitter?
- 8.) How do you see social media changing within the next 5 years, especially for how people can engage in social change

### Interview Questions for Nonprofits

- 1.) Can you give me a brief overview of your nonprofit’s mission and what are some your responsibilities in the organization?
- 2.) Within your nonprofit, how many people work directly with social media?
- 3.) Does social media receive a lot of attention in the budget?
- 4.) Which social media platforms are you currently using for your organization?
- 5.) Of these platforms, which one is your favorite to use and why?
- 6.) What are the main goals you’re trying to achieve with your social media?
- 7.) What have been your big successes in social media?
- 8.) Do you use social media to fundraise?
- 9.) Do you wish you had more dedicated social media use at your nonprofit?

### Interview Questions for Advisory Organizations

- 1.) What are your duties and responsibilities for in this organization?
- 2.) Why do small and medium nonprofits need an organization like yours? What benefits can they gain that larger nonprofits would not?
- 3.) What benefits do smaller organizations get vs. larger ones?
- 4.) Over the years, have you noticed that more nonprofits are embracing social media?
- 5.) What would you say are the biggest barriers that prevent a nonprofit from fully embracing social media? Besides limited resources, what are some other challenges?
- 6.) Does your organization test and/or recommend new social media platforms that nonprofits can use? If so how do they make these recommendations?

- 7.) What is your opinion regarding the effectiveness of online calls to action, petitioning, information sharing, and other forms of digital engagement. Does it spur genuine social change?
- 8.) How do you see social media changing within the next 5 years?

Interview Disclaimer

“This interview is for an Honors Capstone project at American University in Washington D.C. I am not tape-recording, but I am taking notes. If you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions at any point, you do not have to answer them.”