

School of Public and Environmental Affairs

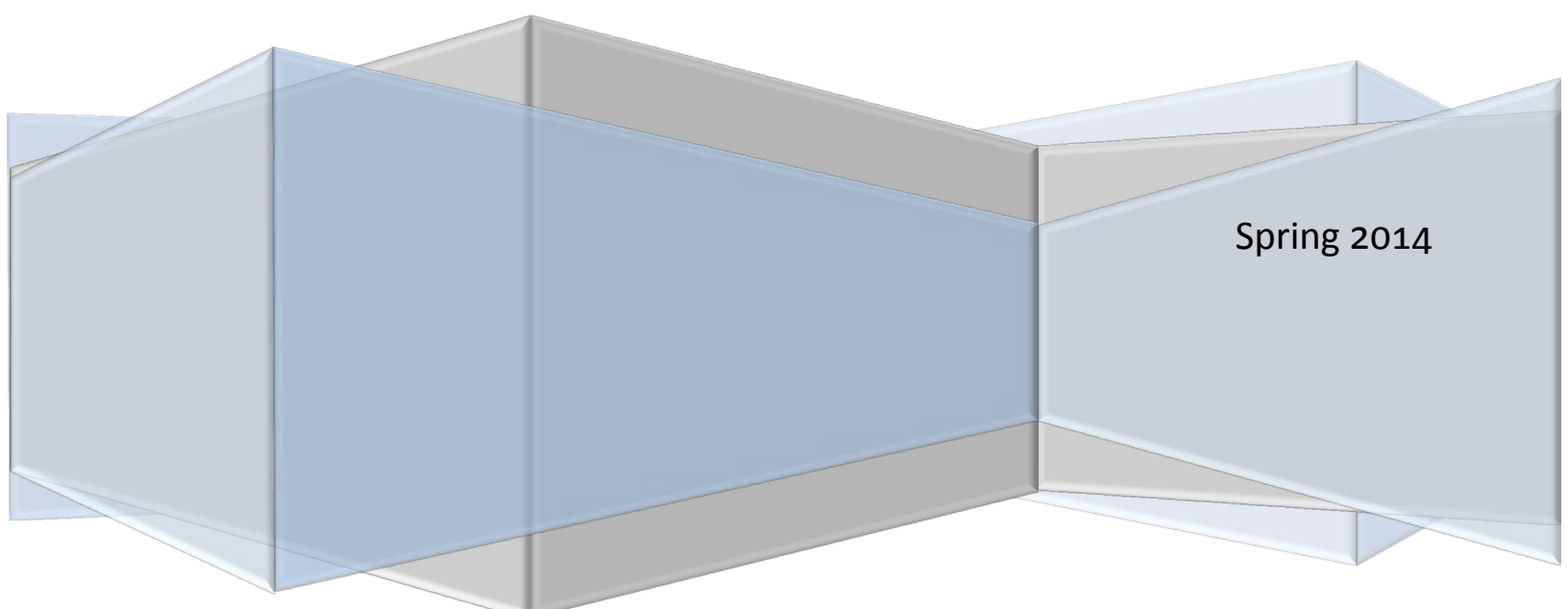
# Social Media in the Social Sector

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*Under what conditions is social media effective for small nonprofits?*

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## Abstract

Social media is changing the way people communicate not only in their personal lives but also in private sector marketing and social sector donor relations. Social networking allows nonprofit organizations to connect with their donors and advocates on a daily basis. This enhances transparency and accountability for the organization. Social media can be particularly effective for public engagement and mass mobilization for a specific cause. Nonprofits can appeal to the millennial generation in particular through engaging in social media. Generally, nonprofit executives recognize these benefits of social media participation, yet few have harnessed social media as a predominate method to achieve their chief goal of fundraising.

Experts disagree on the necessity of social media use for small nonprofit organizations in particular as well as best practices. No uniform social media strategy will prove effective for every organization, but some general guidelines can be implemented to increase social media effectiveness for small nonprofits. A social media strategy must be tailored to an organization's scope and mission. Social media is constantly evolving, as are the practices of nonprofit organizations. Small nonprofits can learn from social media use by larger organizations and implement practices as suited to their unique needs and abilities.

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## Introduction

Nonprofits are social organizations by definition. Charities attempt to serve the public by meeting some social need. Not surprisingly, nonprofit organizations are engaging in the new forms of online media such as web pages, blogs, and social networking sites which allow for a conversation. Large and mid-size nonprofits are adding online communication to their public relations and marketing strategies, capitalizing on existing connections with donors and supporters who use social media for personal uses anyway.

Nonprofits are attempting to harness the immense potential of the internet to reach its millions of users. In 2008, the largest US charities were outpacing businesses and higher education institutions in their use, familiarity, and monitoring of social media,<sup>1</sup> but a 2009 survey of mid-size nonprofits found that respondents considered social media to be less useful than expected when they began usage.<sup>2</sup> This paper seeks to understand why. It asks, “Under what conditions is social media effective for small nonprofits?”

Much of the research on social media use by nonprofits focuses on large organizations, but the vast majority of nonprofits are small.<sup>3</sup> Small nonprofits often have limited staff and resources, and they may struggle to keep up with their larger counterparts as social media use becomes more popular and increasingly intricate.

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<sup>1</sup> Barnes, Nora Ganim, and Eric Mattson. "Still setting the pace in social media: The first longitudinal study of usage by the largest US charities." *University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research* (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Ogden, Timothy, and S. Laura. "Social Networking and Mid-Size Non-Profits: What's the Use." *Philanthropy Action* (2009): 1-21.

<sup>3</sup>Independent Sector. [http://www.independentsector.org/scope\\_of\\_the\\_sector](http://www.independentsector.org/scope_of_the_sector)

There are various social media tools which allow for various activities online. Many of social media's objectives such as communicating information or building lasting relationships are difficult to quantify, but practitioners have begun to measure the emerging trends in media use by nonprofits. Nonprofits can measure results in dollars raised online and completed calls to action (i.e. petition signatures). These measures only gauge online activity, which may or may not result in actual social change. The bulk of nonprofit work continues to occur offline.

Defining success on social media depends on a nonprofit's objectives for engaging in online communication. Online campaigns are often designed in terms of quantifiable outcomes. Further engagement can be measured in terms of offline action, such as commitments to give recurring donations or volunteer.<sup>4</sup> Often, nonprofits will not be able to calculate a tangible return on their investment in social media, but they can define success in their own terms through organizational goals.<sup>5</sup>

Small nonprofits may have goals which are limited by the organization's size. Small nonprofits cannot rely on name recognition and popular awareness like larger charities. This should not deter them from implementing social media strategies, but there are certain conditions which will allow for greater success of these strategies. A social media strategy must take into consideration an organization's scope and abilities. Small nonprofits must consider their audience, mission, and capabilities when initiating social media conversations. With the appropriate considerations, a small nonprofit can benefit from social media's cost-effective advantages, such as expanding donor networks and reaching youth.

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<sup>4</sup> Sklair, Aphra, and Daisy Wakefield. *Philanthropy and Social Media*. Rep.: Institute for Philanthropy, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Kanter, Beth, Katie Delahaye Paine, and William T Paarlberg. *Measuring the Networked Nonprofit: Using Data to Change the World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley imprint, 2012.

## Definitions

### Social Media

The concept of *social* media emerged in contrast to traditional one-way media. The term describes newly uncontrolled mass distributions through the internet<sup>6</sup>. Traditional broadcast media connect people to information while online social media tools also connect people to people. Social *networking* began as a term distinct from social media to describe the use of the internet to connect with others and exchange information through tools such as Myspace and Facebook. The two terms have become mostly interchangeable as the various tools have evolved to include aspects of both mass distribution as well as networking<sup>7</sup>. Twitter, for example, involves the media of microblogging as well as the opportunity to connect with like-minded others. For my purposes, social media refers to the use of popular internet tools (outlined in chart below) which serve to connect people, information, and organizations<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Ogden, Timothy, and S. Laura. "Social Networking and Mid-Size Non-Profits: What's the Use." *Philanthropy Action* (2009): 1-21.

<sup>7</sup> Ogden, Timothy, and S. Laura. "Social Networking and Mid-Size Non-Profits: What's the Use." *Philanthropy Action* (2009): 1-21.

<sup>8</sup> Sklair, Aphra, and Daisy Wakefield. *Philanthropy and Social Media*. Rep.: Institute for Philanthropy, 2011.

## Social Media Tools

Tool	Post Content	User Base	How to Connect	Focus	Unique Qualities
<b>Twitter</b>	Text, some pictures, less than 140 characters	General public, young	Follow to see content in feed	Humorous/interesting news, content, stories	Hashtags(#) to link content, retweet to share post again
<b>Facebook</b>	Text, often pictures and links	General public, older	Like to see content in feed	Personal news, stories, links to interesting content	Most widely used tool
<b>Instagram</b>	Pictures with captions	General public, young, female	Follow to see content in feed	Interesting/artistic photos	Mobile-based, visual, uses hashtags
<b>YouTube</b>	Videos	Young	Subscribe	Informative and entertaining videos	Least social tool, visual
<b>LinkedIn</b>	Text, some links	Business Professionals	Form 'connection'	Professional networking	Professionally oriented, not personal

## Nonprofit

The concept of the social (nonprofit) sector emerged in contrast to the traditional business (for-profit) and governmental (public) sectors. A nonprofit is an organization driven by a social mission which is legally limited in how it may use its acquired funds<sup>9</sup>. These organizations typically engage in what is considered charity or philanthropy work. Most of the research discussed here excludes religious or political organizations. For my purposes, a *small* nonprofit refers to an organization with an annual budget of less than \$1 million.

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<sup>9</sup> Hopkins, Bruce R. *Starting and Managing a Nonprofit Organization: a Legal Guide*. 6th ed. Hoboken: Wiley, 2013.

## How do nonprofits use social media in general?

For nonprofits, social media theoretically serves to engage supporters and solicit donations<sup>10</sup>, the foundational tasks of nonprofit work. Organizations across the nonprofit sector are finding ways to participate in social media as it fits within their mission, often through information sharing and relationship building rather than fundraising. Nonprofits use social media in a variety of ways depending on their strategy and goals, as outlined in the table below.

Activity	Description	Perceived Benefits	Limitations	Example
<b>Advocacy and Awareness</b>	Sending messages, marketing a particular position	Achieving mission if advocacy-related, social change	Must demand further action, may not produce results	Awareness campaign: It Gets Better Project
<b>Networking</b>	Making new connections through existing ones	Larger donor/volunteer base, more resources	Social media allows for varying levels of engagement	Ladder of engagement
<b>Accountability, Transparency, and Reporting</b>	Open sharing of information to public, online archive of documents	Public image as transparent org, easy to engage online	Displayed information may not tell complete story	Guidestar profile
<b>Fundraising</b>	Soliciting donations online	More cost-effective than print solicitations, greater donor base	Donors slow to trust online giving	Peer-to-peer solicitation on Facebook
<b>Appealing to Youth</b>	Reaching the Millennial Generation as they want to be reached	Attracting long-term support early, reaching young volunteers	Younger people have less money to donate	Improved mobile experience

<sup>10</sup> Ogden, Timothy, and S. Laura. "Social Networking and Mid-Size Non-Profits: What's the Use." *Philanthropy Action* (2009): 1-21.



## Advocacy and Awareness

The first way nonprofits use social media is for advocacy and awareness. Social media is designed to communicate messages<sup>11</sup>. For nonprofits, these messages may take form in advocacy or awareness campaigns. One example is the Enough Project's Raise Hope for Congo campaign<sup>12</sup> which raises awareness about conflict minerals and sexual violence in DR Congo. Advocacy organizations may also engage in messages of hope, such as the It Gets Better campaign that involved over 10,000 YouTube videos which discouraged suicide among LGBT youth.<sup>13</sup>

These and other successful online campaigns relied on an existing community of support both on- and offline. Viral videos and calls for petition signatures are easily shared across social media tools and within personal networks. Particularly popular campaigns may even be reported on by the traditional media as television news is integrating social media trends as part of daily broadcasts. Social media can be a mission-driven pursuit for nonprofits whose missions are based purely in awareness or advocacy, such as for the It Gets Better Project. The It Gets Better Project's mission is "to communicate to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth around the world that it gets better, and to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for

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<sup>11</sup> Sklair, Aphra, and Daisy Wakefield. *Philanthropy and Social Media*. Rep.: Institute for Philanthropy, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.raisehopeforcongo.org/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>

them”<sup>14</sup>. Because their main practice is communication, utilizing various communication tools to reach youth is an understandable activity for It Gets Better.

However, few nonprofits confine their work to these aspects of social change. Messages usually prompt action. Advocacy organizations may use social media to ask supporters to sign online petitions which then must be taken to lawmakers, or the organization may use social media to invite the public to attend community events. The Raise Hope for Congo campaign uses social media not only to share stories of Congolese people negatively affected by conflict minerals, but also to encourage their followers to ask their cities, schools, and electronics producers to make responsible purchasing decisions<sup>15</sup>. Online communication through social media can turn into social change offline.

## **Networking**

Nonprofits send messages of advocacy and awareness to their online networks. Social media/networking is intended for two-way messaging which may transform messages into connections and, occasionally, personal relationships. Supporters and advocates will fall somewhere along an organization’s ladder of engagement, from low engagement (Twitter follows, Facebook likes) to high engagement (creating content, donating)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.raisehopeforcongo.org/content/take-action>

<sup>16</sup> Kanter, Beth, Katie Delahaye Paine, and William T Paarlberg. *Measuring the Networked Nonprofit: Using Data to Change the World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley imprint, 2012.



## Ladder of Engagement

Degree	Action	Motivation
<b>Very Low</b>	Reads the tweet	Habit of reading Twitter
<b>Low</b>	Re-Tweets without modifying the message	Has some passing interest in the Cause, feels they are doing something, may or may not know the original Twitter user
<b>Medium</b>	Re-Tweets or @replies with a question about Tweet or clicks through link	Trusts the Twitter user or Cause, has a personal or emotional connection to Cause, may have taken some action in the past or influenced by peer group
<b>High</b>	Makes a donation or takes some action	Has relationship with Twitter user or Cause online or offline, personal experience, reciprocity, or has taken action in the past.
<b>Very High</b>	Makes a donation or takes action and actively encourages others to do so	Has a strong relationship w/Twitter user or Cause online/offline, personal experience, and was asked by the Cause.

Beth Kanter: @kanter

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The chart above outlines the ladder of engagement on Twitter. Users can engage in various activities depending on how compelled they are by the content presented to them. A highly engaged supporter will do more than just consume the content they see (as they would with traditional one-way media). They will participate in the social aspects of online tools as appropriate (retweets, donating, etc.,) to display a deep level of support for the organization while engaging their own personal online networks.

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<sup>17</sup> Kanter, Beth, Katie Delahaye Paine, and William T Paarlberg. *Measuring the Networked Nonprofit: Using Data to Change the World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley imprint, 2012.

Expanding the online network is the first step nonprofits can take toward engaging supporters and soliciting more concrete action such as volunteering or attending a fundraising event. Supporters can be engaged offline in traditional methods, but online social networking allows the potential to reach the networks of those engaged which often span distance and demographics. An advocate who shares a nonprofit's Facebook post may spark discussion from friends and family around the world who comment on the post, but only if he/she is highly engaged and motivated to do so because of some existing relationship or personal invitation.

### **Accountability, Transparency, and Reporting**

Social media allows immediate, two-way communication between a nonprofit and its network. Tax-exempt nonprofits are expected to be accountable to the public<sup>18</sup> and social media allows them to communicate quickly and openly with the masses. A disaster relief organization may post online about an event moments after it occurs, and the public may engage in dialogue through the various available channels. Alternatively, individuals may share their experience volunteering for or receiving services from a nonprofit on their personal online profiles with the potential to reach a wider audience.

Nonprofits use social media to share their financial information. Tax forms and other transparency tools may be found on the reporting website Guidestar or an organization's own website. Tools such as Facebook and Twitter allow the public to interact easily with nonprofit managers and staff to ask questions or engage in discussion. Nonprofits can show exactly where

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<sup>18</sup> Worth, Michael J. *Nonprofit Management : Principles and Practice*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009.

donations are going through visually-appealing charts, photos, and videos. The public can observe, interact with, and critique nonprofit activity through what is available online.<sup>19</sup>

Not only can the public critique content they receive from an organization itself, but certain “watchdog” agencies exist to hold nonprofits accountable to standards the agency creates.<sup>20</sup> Organizations which choose not to participate in online communication do not simply abstain from negative attention, but may be giving up their ability to refute any claims the watchdogs or personal internet users make. For example, a nonprofit which hopes to attract talented managers may invest in its overhead costs, but watchdog sites may report it as having poor financial management versus an organization which only spends money on programming. Social media allows nonprofits to tell their own story, especially if their activities differ from standard practices.

## **Fundraising**

Social media allows nonprofits to solicit donations online. Nonprofits can post links to online giving sites through their social media profiles and ask their followers to donate. Donors can give through a few clicks rather than mailing in a check or delivering credit card information over the phone. Online giving is increasing significantly every year,<sup>21</sup> but nonprofit executives are still disappointed with how little social media has increased their income.<sup>22</sup> Many managers

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<sup>19</sup> Sklair, Aphra, and Daisy Wakefield. *Philanthropy and Social Media*. Rep.: Institute for Philanthropy, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Worth, Michael J. *Nonprofit Management : Principles and Practice*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Castillo, Marco, Ragan Petrie, and Clarence Wardell. "Fundraising through online social networks: A field experiment on peer-to-peer solicitation." *Journal of Public Economics* (2014).

<sup>22</sup> Sklair, Aphra, and Daisy Wakefield. *Philanthropy and Social Media*. Rep.: Institute for Philanthropy, 2011.

assume they will be able to make social media work for their purposes, but individual users do not engage in social media to spend money. Placing a “Donate Now” link on an organizational website does not replace the effort and time necessary to maintain a fundraising strategy. Online fundraising is most effective for meeting particular objectives; donors may click to ‘crowdfund’ a campaign which meets a specific program goal, but social media has not yet replaced traditional donor solicitation methods such as annual campaign mailings or in-person events.

Social media is optimal for certain fundraising methods. Social networks allow donors to “share” about their giving as part of the online image they project to their acquaintances. After a donation is made online, the donor often has an option to post about their gift via various online profiles. Nonprofits can capitalize on this form of “warm glow” giving which incentivizes donors through personal benefits (appearing generous, impressing others) as well as altruistic ones.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond the individual benefits to a donor, social networks facilitate peer-to-peer solicitation; donors can encourage their online friends to donate as well. Donors have been found to respond to incentives to encourage their peers to donate. Users are more likely to post such a request on a friend’s Facebook wall than asking directly through private messages, which are

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, Sarah, and Kimberley Scharf. "Charitable Giving and Social Group Size: Does it take a lot of Friends to be a Successful Fundraiser?." (2013).

generally used for casual or private conversation rather than a request for money.<sup>24</sup> Online fundraising can be effective when designed within the typical use of a social media tool.

## **Millennial Generation**

Online communication can be especially effective for nonprofits interested in connecting with young people in particular. The Millennial Generation, defined as those aged 20-35, is particularly immersed in social media. While this generation is generally poor, they tend to be brand loyal and competitive.<sup>25</sup> Nonprofits can attract young people now so they may become long-term supporters as their income increases. Additionally, nonprofits may want to attract young people as volunteers rather than just as donors. College students are more likely to volunteer than other age groups.<sup>26</sup> Service learning is a popular practice in college curricula and students are likely to become long-term supporters of nonprofits they volunteer for.<sup>27</sup>

Nonprofits can attract this generation through social media. ‘Millennials’ reportedly prefer to learn about nonprofits online rather than in print or face to face.<sup>28</sup> Millennials research nonprofits on organizational websites first, and then follow the cause via social media. Posted information can then be shared across a wide network of friends, family, and classmates. They

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<sup>24</sup> Castillo, Marco, Ragan Petrie, and Clarence Wardell. "Fundraising through online social networks: A field experiment on peer-to-peer solicitation." *Journal of Public Economics* (2014).

<sup>25</sup> Baranyi, Eniko Eva. "Volunteerism and Charitable Giving among the Millennial Generation: How to Attract and Retain Millennials." (2011).

<sup>26</sup> Worth, Michael J. *Nonprofit Management : Principles and Practice*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Baranyi, Eniko Eva. "Volunteerism and Charitable Giving among the Millennial Generation: How to Attract and Retain Millennials." (2011).

<sup>28</sup> *Millennial Impact Report*. Publication. : Achieve, 2013.

are more likely to share information about a general cause (conflict minerals) than a specific organization (The Enough Project),<sup>29</sup> but nonprofits rarely use social media to highlight a cause on its own.<sup>30</sup>

Millennials and other generations are engaging in social media via smartphone more and more frequently, as opposed to a traditional desktop. Young survey respondents cite a mobile-friendly website (one that is easily viewed on a mobile device, with large text and buttons) as a must-have for nonprofits which aim to engage young supporters.<sup>31</sup> Focusing on the mobile experience forces communications personnel to adapt their website pages and emails in order to maximize readership. Nonprofit managers may need to call upon a communications expert (or a Millennial) to develop effective online campaigns.

Nonprofits can choose not to engage with Millennials in particular through social media, but their preferences likely reflect how their parents and grandparents will soon use social media as well. As certain online tools become less popular among younger generations, they become more popular among older generations which are becoming more engaged online in general.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Millennial Impact Report*. Publication. : Achieve, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Ogden, Timothy, and S. Laura. "Social Networking and Mid-Size Non-Profits: What's the Use." *Philanthropy Action* (2009): 1-21.

<sup>31</sup> *Millennial Impact Report*. Publication. : Achieve, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Lenhart, Amanda, et al. "Social Media & Mobile Internet Use among Teens and Young Adults. Millennials." *Pew Internet & American Life Project* (2010).



## Best Practices

Certain lessons are emerging as commonly applicable best practices in the evolving realm of social media<sup>33</sup>. A nonprofit's social media strategy will be most effective when it follows certain guidelines. Primarily, a social media strategy should be designed to allow the organization to add its voice to existing online activity. Nonprofits will do best when they try to understand how social media works for individual users. The most popular social media tools were designed for individuals, not nonprofits, so organizations must acknowledge the superficial limitations of their relationships with online 'friends' and find ways to engage their followers beyond the screen. Users of the various tools adapt their profiles to fit the particular status quo, and organization must do the same. Engaging in social media is another way for nonprofits to serve the public; effective campaigns and conversations enrich the casual, fun interactions already taking place online.

Nonprofits can engage their online supporters by empowering them to prompt social change. To reiterate from previous sections, social media use can only be effective for nonprofits when it also achieves some further social goal. Social movements rarely occur as a top-down command. People should feel in control of the message as it reflects their values<sup>34</sup>. Social media allows empowered nonprofit supporters to communicate their support to their own networks and even solicit additional action from their friends. Nonprofits can use social media as part of their organizational branding which reflects their mission, vision, and values and then become part of their supporters' story as well.

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<sup>33</sup> Sklair, Aphra, and Daisy Wakefield. *Philanthropy and Social Media*. Rep.: Institute for Philanthropy, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Sklair, Aphra, and Daisy Wakefield. *Philanthropy and Social Media*. Rep.: Institute for Philanthropy, 2011.

Nonprofits must understand the ‘netiquette’ of each tool- the specific expectations and qualifications for profiles and posts on each site-for users to feel comfortable adding the nonprofit to their online community. Nonprofits can easily identify some aspects of ‘netiquette’, such as proper timing. Nonprofits can schedule posts to send during times of high activity, such as during weekday afternoons and weekends. Scheduling tools such as Hootsuite allow nonprofits to plan posts throughout the day and week in order to reach the most users at one time. Organizations can study these and other common online practices and decide which strategy will work for them, likely through trial and error.

Organizations will also need to tailor their content to their particular audience. Social media use can be directed toward an external audience in order to expand a nonprofits’ network, or it may choose to appeal to its existing users and further their engagement. Nonprofits must determine which social media activities and tools are best suited for their goals and post accordingly. As explained in the previous section, a nonprofit which aims to engage Millennials will want to focus on mobile-friendly websites and tools such as Instagram and Twitter.

Regardless of tool, social media is visual; posts with photos are more likely to be shared than bulk text<sup>35</sup>. Every tool allows some level of visual content, and certain ones are purely designed to share photos and videos. Nonprofits can attract more online attention with compelling images. Depending on its activities, a nonprofit may need to invest in a graphic designer or cinematographer to produce visual content for social media.

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<sup>35</sup> Kanter, Beth, Katie Delahaye Paine, and William T Paarlberg. *Measuring the Networked Nonprofit: Using Data to Change the World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley imprint, 2012.

## Small Nonprofits and Social Media

The nonprofit sector is clearly participating in social media in many ways, but much of the existing research on social media use by nonprofits has focused on large nonprofits or mid-sized nonprofits in particular. Some research even assumes that small nonprofits have no choice but to engage in social media because they do not have the resources to communicate in other ways.<sup>36</sup> This section seeks to understand when social media can be effective for small nonprofits in particular by examining the benefits and challenges associated with social media use.

### Benefits

#### Cost

Obtaining various social media profiles is virtually free for nonprofits. Facebook and Twitter, the two most popular tools, never require user fees. Some blog platforms, mail distribution systems such as MailChimp, and the scheduling tool Hootsuite require no fee for a basic account, but offer a paid version with more features. These ‘pro’ accounts are designed for large or media-oriented organizations and are likely unnecessary for the use of small nonprofits. A holistic web presence through an organizational site, blog, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and MailChimp may be established entirely for free, given a nonprofit’s access to an internet connection and the available personnel time and labor.

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<sup>36</sup> Ogden, Timothy, and S. Laura. "Social Networking and Mid-Size Non-Profits: What’s the Use." *Philanthropy Action* (2009): 1-21.

Social media can be highly cost-effective for small nonprofits with limited finances. The marginal costs to communicating online are much cheaper than those of traditional messaging through direct mailings or phone campaigns, which larger organizations may be better prepared to invest in. A nonprofit may be small because it is new. Social media allows for experimentation in messages and communication methods at little cost. Ghastly mistakes can greatly hurt an organization, but a post sent at 3am which received zero likes will serve as a harmless lesson in scheduling.

## **Reach**

The advent of social media broke down traditional communication power structures which previously limited a small nonprofit's messaging scope.<sup>37</sup> Social media offers small organizations with limited resources the potential to reach millions through the internet. Social media may be particularly effective for small nonprofits which hope to grow and expand their impact. A nonprofit may attract support from internet users outside the scope of the community in which it operates. Adding more online followers allows a nonprofit to form an informal, long-term network, but will not necessarily prompt concrete action.

## **Transparency**

Social media may be the only outlet for small nonprofits to communicate and report to the general public transparently. Organizations with limited resources may not be able to produce an annual report or advertise through traditional media, but they may easily link their

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<sup>37</sup> Sklair, Aphra, and Daisy Wakefield. *Philanthropy and Social Media*. Rep.: Institute for Philanthropy, 2011.

Guidestar profile (which is a third-party source for tax forms and financial information) to their website or social media pages to demonstrate financial accountability. Nonprofits with limited staff will more easily be able to respond to social media posts than phone calls or written communication.

## Challenges

### Finding a Voice

Social media makes mass communication possible and simple without placing major financial or technological burdens on small nonprofits. An organization can hypothetically reach the over 200 million active Twitter users without spending a cent; but because social media tools are so popular, small nonprofits must ensure their messages stand out among the white noise of the internet. An organization's intended audience may only be active on a few social media tools or none at all<sup>38</sup>.

Creating an online profile does not ensure followers or 'friends'; a nonprofit must build their network based on existing connections. Small nonprofits may have fewer initial connections to build from. A nonprofit can 'tweet' ten times a day, but the posts will serve little purpose without an audience to engage in dialogue. Even if a nonprofit can prompt their few

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<sup>38</sup> Sklair, Aphra, and Daisy Wakefield. *Philanthropy and Social Media*. Rep.: Institute for Philanthropy, 2011.

followers to invite friends to join them, there must be a compelling reason to do more than ignore the invitation or accept without looking further<sup>39</sup>.

Nonprofits use social media for marketing purposes. Effective marketing strategies rely on finding a distinct voice for the organization which speaks to their particular social benefit.<sup>40</sup> Larger organizations may already have a defined brand or image which they simply project through their social media channels, but small nonprofits may struggle to find their voice among the many social media users.

## **Resources**

Social media use may be technically free, but effective posting involves time and expertise comparable to traditional forms of outreach media. Nonprofits can solicit volunteer labor to manage social media profiles, but the messenger needs to understand all aspects of the organization in order to represent it properly as part of the marketing and public relations strategy of an organization. This may require a manager or paid staff member to supervise the dialogue and avoid mixed messages. Smaller nonprofits may not be able to provide paid staff to create and implement the social media strategy effectively, especially without a clearly defined brand image.

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<sup>39</sup> Sklair, Aphra, and Daisy Wakefield. *Philanthropy and Social Media*. Rep.: Institute for Philanthropy, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Worth, Michael J. *Nonprofit Management : Principles and Practice*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009.

## Results

Social networking allows the potential to reach millions in a matter of hours. If a small nonprofit were to have a highly effective social media campaign that went ‘viral’ (shared and posted thousands or millions of times within a short period), it would need to be prepared to handle an influx of attention and questions from the general public. Kony2012, a video produced and released by nonprofit Invisible Children, became the most viral video in history<sup>41</sup>, which led to an onslaught of attention, criticism, and inquiry that shut down the organization’s website and did not allow the nonprofit to further the conversation. If a small nonprofit reaches new audiences outside of their community through the internet, it must be prepared to engage them somehow.

Small nonprofits will much more likely face the challenge of having a small online audience than an enormous one, but the internet allows the potential for either. Nonprofits may want to focus on the size of their audience as an indicator of success, but social impact is not a direct result of Facebook likes<sup>42</sup>. Nonprofits aim to fulfill various missions in order to effect social change. This happens as a result of public support through donations and volunteerism. Just because a nonprofit has a wide online following does not mean their audience will become donors or volunteers. There must be a greater motivation to act beyond clicking.

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<sup>41</sup> Flock, Elizabeth (4 April 2012): "Kony 2012 screening in Uganda met with anger, rocks thrown at screen". *Washington Post*.

<sup>42</sup> Kanter, Beth, and Allison H Fine. *The Networked Nonprofit : Connecting with Social Media to Drive Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Social media is a communication method which is ultimately self-indulgent. People likely do not check Facebook during a work break in order to make a lasting social change in their community. Users log on to social media to learn what others are thinking, boast about their own experiences, and possibly to make new connections. Small nonprofits must find a way to break through the noise and inspire others to achieve their mission.



## Case Study: Giving Back to Africa



### Background

Giving Back to Africa (GBA) is a Bloomington, IN-based nonprofit founded in 2007 which empowers youth in the Democratic Republic of Congo to become servant leaders-young people who shape and lead their communities through service.<sup>43</sup> GBA employed two college-age interns in May 2013 whose task was to create and implement a social media strategy for the small organization during their summer break. The executive director hoped social media could expand GBA's community reach, ultimately adding to their donor base.

### Strategy

The interns first researched effective social media use for nonprofits in general and the social media use of similar Bloomington organization. They read and analyzed a portfolio on onboarding documents designed to introduce all aspects of GBA's work. The portfolio included various organizational founding documents such as bylaws and articles of incorporation, past mailings and media coverage, and minutes of board meetings. The interns studied the organization as well as social media use by small nonprofits in the Bloomington community. They then developed a social media strategy based on how they felt GBA could best participate in social media. They identified people and organizations they hoped to connect with online.

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<sup>43</sup> "Our Mission." *Giving Back to Africa*. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

The strategy also included a posting schedule:

Tool	Frequency	Post Length	Type/Subject	Goal
Facebook	1-2 or more posts/day	200 words max.	About work in DRC Detailed, Older Focus	Prompt conversation
Twitter	3X/Day	<117 Char, use only 2 hashtags	Short, with links to blog, articles, other DRC stories	Connect with other individuals, NGOs
LinkedIn	Daily	Varying	Relevant to program development, youth leadership	Build professional connections
Blog	1-2x/week	Varying lengths, longer	Program committee reports Event	Tell the story of GBA's work on the ground

This schedule identified which tools the interns planned to use and how. The interns created a Hootsuite account to schedule the appropriate number of posts each week. Along with GBA's executive director, they compiled content ideas for various blog post series including a retrospective series to cover information from before May 2013 when events began to be documented as they occurred.

Social media was used throughout the summer to promote an annual gala, GBA's main fundraising event which usually raises more money than any other event or campaign. Content included photos of items to be auctioned during the event and reposting of photos from the previous year's event. Social media stories also covered a young volunteer's hike along the Appalachian Trail (AT) as a fundraising event for GBA. The gala and the hike acted as

continuing series of short posts over several weeks. At the end of the summer, the interns analyzed the social media strategy implementation and created guidelines for future use by volunteers and board members.

## **Findings**

An evaluation of GBA's social media use was presented at the annual board meeting in August 2013. The interns found that Facebook is better suited for GBA's purposes than Twitter because the majority of GBA's supporters is middle-aged or older and is more likely to be on Facebook than Twitter. Today, GBA has 300 likes on Facebook, up from 130 in April 2013. Their audience engages most with short, informative stories accompanied by photos, especially their young Congolese clients. The story about the AT hike prompted online donations which contributed to the \$5,000 raised by the young man.

Through social media, GBA has been able to transition some marketing practices online such as event registration and donor solicitation, but the organization continues to use print mailings and other traditional communications to appeal to its older donor base. GBA only has mailing addresses for many of its supporters and not their email addresses which people are hesitant to give out.<sup>44</sup>

GBA has received certain benefits from its social media use, such as costs and reach. Volunteer interns continue to manage all of GBA's social media profiles. GBA does not spend any money on social media, but the use has decreased as the college interns returned to full class

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<sup>44</sup> D. Hawes, personal communication, February 21, 2014

schedules after the summer. GBA has been able to reduce some mailing costs by transitioning event invitations from print to online. GBA has been able to save some money as well as expand its supporter base. GBA's Facebook following includes users who live outside of the Bloomington community who are able to follow GBA's activities by reading its posts.

Social media has not changed the way GBA operates its programs in DRC, nor has increased use drastically altered its supporter base. GBA faces the challenges of finding a voice among many organizations as well as retaining the labor necessary to continue social media use. GBA practices social media as a supplementary activity which may assist other organizational efforts. GBA's existing social media strategy may be expanded and developed as the organization grows, but for now the organization does not have the resources to invest in online activities as a priority.

## Conclusion

Small nonprofits do not necessarily need to expend their limited resources on social media efforts if they will not suit the organization's mission, but social media offers particular benefits for nonprofits interested in attracting young supporters and whose programs are based on awareness and advocacy campaigns. Small nonprofits must develop a social media strategy in order to integrate their voice in the ongoing online conversation.

As the case study demonstrates, social media can be useful as a secondary practice for small organizations, but does not replace other managerial activities. GBA saw some immediate benefits of social media use, such as reducing certain costs and sharing messages more widely and frequently, but the remains to be seen a clear impact of social media on their overall nonprofit activity.

Social media is an evolving concept, as are the methods and practices associated with it. Social media profiles are easy to attain but difficult to sustain. Small nonprofits must have clear, appropriate goals before diving into social media<sup>45</sup>. Nonprofit staff should not assume social media will replace other communication methods, nor will online engagement ensure swift offline action. Rather, social media allows small nonprofits to engage with their supporters, expand their support network, and develop these relationships over time. With a well-developed strategy, social media can prompt social change.

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<sup>45</sup> Ogden, Timothy, and S. Laura. "Social Networking and Mid-Size Non-Profits: What's the Use." *Philanthropy Action* (2009): 1-21.

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