Civic Engagement, Community Attachment, and the Limitations of Social Media

Million, Anthony; Hemphill, Libby; Edwards, Vickie

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CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT, AND THE LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

• A. J. MILLION, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, millioaj@umich.edu • LIBBY HEMPHILL, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
• VICKIE EDWARDS, WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Technology plays a big role in civic life.

Research finds that nonprofits (NPOs) use social media for “issue marketing” and to help educate stakeholders.

NPOs also:

- Use social media to network with local residents (e.g., Voida, Harmon, & Al-Ani, 2012)
- Facilitate collective action
- Tend to use one-way communication strategies

These findings align with Lovejoy and Saxon’s (2012) portrayal of use as related to information, communication, and action.
OUTCOMES

- Why does studying NPO social media use matter?
- Social media lends itself to building organizational capacity, fundraising, event organizing, disaster coordination, and more!
- Harvested data can inform public decision-makers
- Helps NPOs accomplish strategic goals and direct interest-group coordination (e.g., Campbell et al., 2014; Cox et al., 2018)
- May also encourage civic engagement
Civic engagement refers to public-facing actions that improve community life (Ehrlich, 2000)
- Associated with lower rates of crime, poverty, and unemployment
- Better health and education

Two variables predict engagement – social capital and community attachment
- Social capital is connections among individuals
- Community attachment is how connected individuals feel to his/her community and the actors that are positioned inside of it
GAP IN LITERATURE

- Research shows that social media use predicts civic engagement (e.g., Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014)
- Social capital is a focus
  - Social media provides public and nonprofit managers access to a network of contacts they would not otherwise have (Cox et al., 2018)
- Less studied is the role of attachment
  - May apply to online communities (Burke & Settles, 2011), but most work examines offline interaction, as it relates to NPOs
  - Chew et al. (2011) find social media prevents and encourages bond formation
METHODS

- We set out to close this gap in the literature
- Two questions
  1. What role does social media play in facilitating civic engagement, especially as it pertains to use by NPOs?
  2. What role do social capital and community attachment play in this relationship?
- Multi-site, exploratory study
- Qualitative interviews (n=40) at two sites in the upper-Midwest – Chicago, IL and Kalamazoo, MI – and maximum variation sampling
- Recruited using GuideStar and local directories of nonprofits
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy organization</td>
<td>Raised awareness about issues among stakeholders and pushed for changes like criminal justice reform.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare provider</td>
<td>Provides clinical and health-related services to the public.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest group</td>
<td>Non-political groups motivated by shared interests.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political community</td>
<td>Sought to create electoral coalitions of individuals to support candidates in efforts to win office and pass laws.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious organization</td>
<td>Motivated by religious considerations.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential community</td>
<td>Dedicated to issues within residential geographies such as traffic congestion and gentrification.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social group</td>
<td>Dedicated to creating or maintaining social connections.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews contained a range of data

- We asked about NPO social media use, missions, strategies, civic engagement, social capital, community attachment, and use outcomes
- Gathered individual and organizational perspectives

Used an inductive, structural approach to code interview data (Saldaña, 2016)

Developed a codebook

Created a descriptive logic model using our codebook, then re-coded interviews using 12 parent codes and 100+ sub-codes
• Social capital
• Community attachment
• Human capital and agency
• Socioeconomic status
• Individual psychosocial characteristics

Civic engagement
Outcomes
Interaction point

Values and mission
Strategy and rationale
Affordances
Platform
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affordances</td>
<td>Perceived uses of social or other media platform.</td>
<td>1,698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic engagement</td>
<td>Engagement act.</td>
<td>1,417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community attachment</td>
<td>Sentimental or emotional feelings about a community, and the entities within it, that motivate engagement.</td>
<td>1,054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human capital</td>
<td>Attributes embodied in the ability to perform labor.</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual psychosocial trait</td>
<td>Interrelationships between social factors and individual thoughts or behaviors.</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction point</td>
<td>Online and offline interaction context.</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Outcomes associated with civic engagement, often because of social media use.</td>
<td>661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platform</td>
<td>Social media or other platform.</td>
<td>1,282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic status</td>
<td>Position of individual in relation to others within society.</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>Relationships among individuals who live and work in a community allowing it to function.</td>
<td>543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy or rationale for use</td>
<td>Rationale for using platform.</td>
<td>807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values and mission</td>
<td>Motivation for nonprofit or individual to engage in a given activity.</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AFFORDANCES AND ENGAGEMENT

- NPOs used social media many ways
- Common NPO uses included sharing information, organizing events, generating awareness, and sharing videos or content
  - Co-occurrences showed affordances were often interrelated
  - Example: Chicago Women’s March
- Most references to civic engagement included in-person meetings, advocacy, general instances of collective action, and volunteering
- Engagement was online and offline
- Network coordination between NPOs, via social media, was also common
PRIMACY OF THE IN-PERSON

- We also found issues with social media as an engagement tool
- Most references to affective bonds had to do with geographic places, groups with shared interests, professional interests, and values
  - Participants seldom talked about online groups in this deeply personal sense
- Likewise, individuals most attached communities were professions, organization-based, and/or physical in nature
  - Exception: Kalamazoo social media manager
- Why?
Participants frequently said that face-to-face was most conductive to human bonding

- Example: Chicago Ward politician
  - “I think anytime that you're meeting in person it's going to be a lot more personal; in-person meetings cement connection”
  - Example: Kalamazoo NPO group

- Trust element

- Additionally, online communication created opportunities for misunderstandings
  - Example: Kalamazoo labor organizer’s backstage work

- User toxicity and the online disinhibition effect were also factors, which I discuss in more detail later
In interviews, participants spoke mostly about social media, but they combined it with other platforms:

- Facebook dominated
- Email, Twitter, Instagram, and analog media were the next most common

Strategies and use rationales related to tool effectiveness, building organizational capacity, audience reach, brand cultivation, and ease-of-use:

- Example: Chicago alumni association
- Traditional tools – and face-to-face – complemented social media as a way to make up for perceived limitations
- Bricolage
NPOs mined for social capital
- Social media provided ready access to potential volunteers and donors
- NPOs built this capital online (through reach) as well as offline at events, through networking, and socialization

Strong and weak ties
- Weak ties with the majority of social media users, whereas strong ties were associated with people who they met in-person
- Again, trust?
- Example: Kalamazoo animal shelter
Negative online interactions common

Code co-occurrences showed negative interactions were driven by online noise and politics, which pushed people away

However, attitudes about social media were still positive
  - Social media was good at increasing NPO event attendance, extending reach, etc…
  - Offline engagement

Example: Kalamazoo community center using Facebook to solicit diaper donations for needy families
Our findings confirm NPOs use social media to “market” issues, raise awareness about issues, and foster action at the grassroots level.

Confirms prior research, especially Lovejoy and Saxton (2012).

Uniquely, however, we found that social media is limited as a tool for promoting engagement:

- Weaker ties online
- Strongest ties were created in-person and/or preceded online interaction

Explained by a range of things including negative online interactions, noise, and that people connect best in-person.

Improvements are clearly needed!
However, we did not find social media stops civic engagement; only there are some limits to it as an engagement tool.

Granovetter (1973) says that weak ties can be strong.

NPOs using social media to mine for social capital reinforced this point, because it often led to offline benefits in communities.

Confirms prior work (e.g., Cox et al., 2018; Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014).

Clarifies Chew et al. (2011).

A final unresolved question, though, is how strong ties need to be in order to motivate different types of actions.

Encouraging civic engagement is good, but it is not always a goal.
GUIDANCE FOR NONPROFITS

1. Use social media for networking purposes, to generate awareness, to maintain relationships, coordinate with stakeholders, etc.

2. Supplement social media with analog tools

3. Rely on face-to-face interaction when it is needed, and when the goal is to create strong ties

4. There are downstream effects of NPOs using social media in terms of community benefits, and this is very hard to predict

5. Pressure social media companies (their tools act as quasi-public infrastructure)
THANK YOU

A.J. Million and Libby Hemphill, University of Michigan

Vickie Edwards, Western Michigan University

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