

CAIS Paper: Every Task its Tool, Every Tool its Task: Social Media Use in Canadian Non-Profit Organizations

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Abstract

This paper presents emerging results of a national online survey of Canadian Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs) on their perception and use of social media, and their role for the purpose of Knowledge Management (KM). Based on results from the first 320 respondents spanning across local and provincial boundaries, these findings provide insight into what social media platforms are preferred by these organizations, what tasks they are used for and the tasks for which these tools are considered most effective.

Résumé

1. Introduction

The purpose of Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs) is to contribute to and create “social value” in society (Lettieri et al., 2004, p.16), unlike For-Profit Organizations (FPOs) whose primary purpose is to generate economic value. NPOs, through public services and charitable activities, work to support and sustain communities, and advance a particular mission or cause (Teegan et al., 2004; Lettieri et al., 2004; Given et al., 2013). Like FPOs, NPOs are knowledge-oriented organizations (Renshaw and Krishnaswamy, 2009); however, they often work limited budgets, a small pool of skilled workers, and other restrictions. Thus, NPOs must consider both tacit and explicit knowledge emerging from stakeholders, such as employees, board members, partners, customers and user communities, as critical and valuable resources for effective and efficient functioning.

In the last decade, social media have emerged as low-cost, low-threshold, high-impact tools (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010); they are capable of creating, accessing and sharing knowledge, particularly unstructured and tacit knowledge, which can benefit an organization. Properly implemented, a social media use strategy to capture and share knowledge can enhance an organization (van Zyl, 2008; Razmerita et al., 2009). However, examining the current and potential role of social media in NPOs from the perspective of Knowledge Management (KM) is largely unexplored in the literature. This paper addresses this research gap by presenting results from questionnaires received from 320 NPOs, serving a wide variety of situated communities and operational goals. Spanning across local and provincial boundaries within Canada, these findings provide

insight into those social media platforms preferred by these organizations, the tasks for which they are used, and the specific audiences with which NPOs seek to engage using these tools.

2. Literature Review

Many researchers (e.g., Edwards et al. 2005; Marwick, 2001; Benbya et al. 2004; Grudin, 2006) have recommended different tools and technologies for use in KM; these include document management systems, data and text mining, email, groupware, portals and discussion boards. In the last decade, social media tools such as blogs, wikis, YouTube, and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.) have gained attention from individual users, researchers and organizations. Organizations across sectors are attempting to exploit and/or use social media for marketing, fundraising, outreach, recruitment, KM initiatives, etc. Ford and Mason (2013) argued that the deployment of “social media within the organization is viewed as a way to leverage organizational knowledge and improve knowledge management initiatives” (p.8). Researchers are now studying the social media domain from multiple perspectives, including for KM; some examples are discussed below.

David (2011) explored the use of social media as well as other resources on the Internet by NPOs to fulfill their goals and objectives, while Huck et al. (2011) proposed social media based tools as part of the solution of implementing KM initiatives in volunteer-based NPOs. Yates and Paquette (2011) used case examples of the 2010 Haitian earthquake to understand the application of social media in knowledge sharing and decision making. Water and Jones (2011) analyzed “the top 100 office nonprofit YouTube channels” and found that NPOs used “their YouTube videos to inform and educate viewers about their missions, programs, and services” (p.248). Twitter, a micro-blogging social media tool, is being studied by many researchers such as Aharony (2010) and Smitko (2012). Shiri and Rathi (2012) proposed categories of tweets by doing a content analysis of the tweets created by a large, Canadian public library. Jarrahi and Sawyer (2013) identified that social technologies supported and facilitated both formal and informal KM practices, such as locating expertise and experts, finding relevant information, and identifying solutions to problems. The combined field of Social Media and Knowledge Management is an emerging domain; as Hemsley and Mason (2013) noted, their “study suggests that the work on SM and KM has just begun. Further empirical research would be rewarding and help formulate the conceptual and theoretical work remaining” (p.159).

3. Research Design

Online questionnaires were sent to NPOs spanning across regional as well as operational boundaries (see Figure 1) within Canada. They were identified through the publicly accessible online registry provided by the Canada Revenue Agency (<http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca>). A mailing list of registered charities was generated, and a sample of NPOs were invited via email to participate via Survey Monkey. Invitations assigned a unique URL to each recipient, ensuring that only one response could be submitted per NPO. The findings reported here represent sample survey results from the first 320 respondents; however, data collection is ongoing, and will be completed early in 2014.

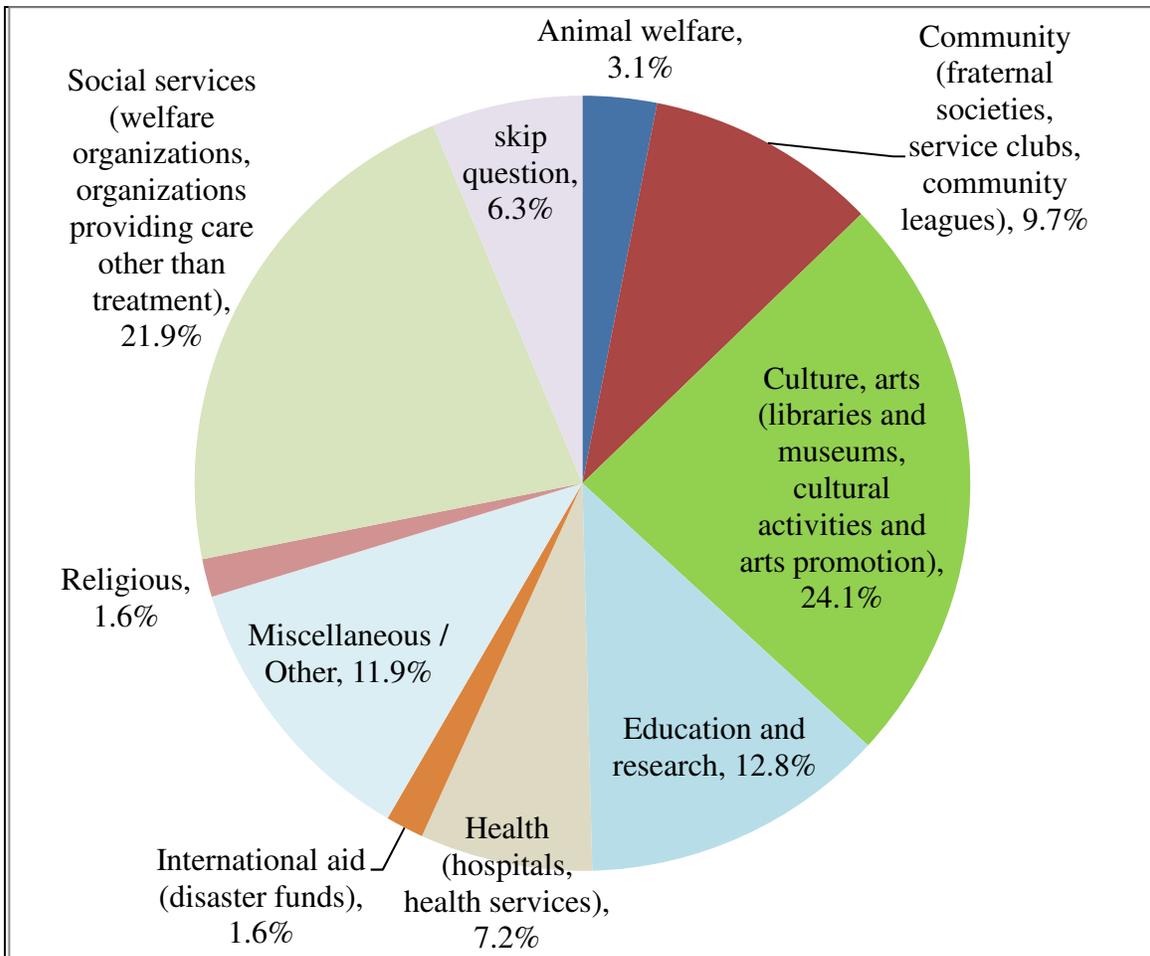


Figure 1. Percentage of sample (320 respondents) by type of organization

4. Findings and Discussion

The emerging findings show that, of the 320 NPOs surveyed, 223 (or 69.7%) indicated that they used social media and 97 (30.3%) did not use social media. Among the 223 NPOs that used social media, Facebook was the most popular tool adopted, with nearly 96% saturation, followed by Twitter (65.8%), YouTube (45.9%) and others (see Figure 2).

NPOs that did not use social media did use other technological tools (e.g., productivity software, physical print documents, etc.) for KM activities. These NPOs shared and gathered knowledge with the public and with volunteers and staff primarily through formal written documentation (e.g., manuals, reports, newsletters, etc.) and formal and informal in-person interactions. The 223 NPOs that used social media also employed many of these same methods for KM, suggesting that social media serve as a supplement to (not a replacement for) other practices.

The emergence of Facebook as the most popular tool is noteworthy when considered in light of findings from previous qualitative research; Forcier et al. (2013a) compare findings from interviews in NPOs between the use of Twitter and Facebook, indicating

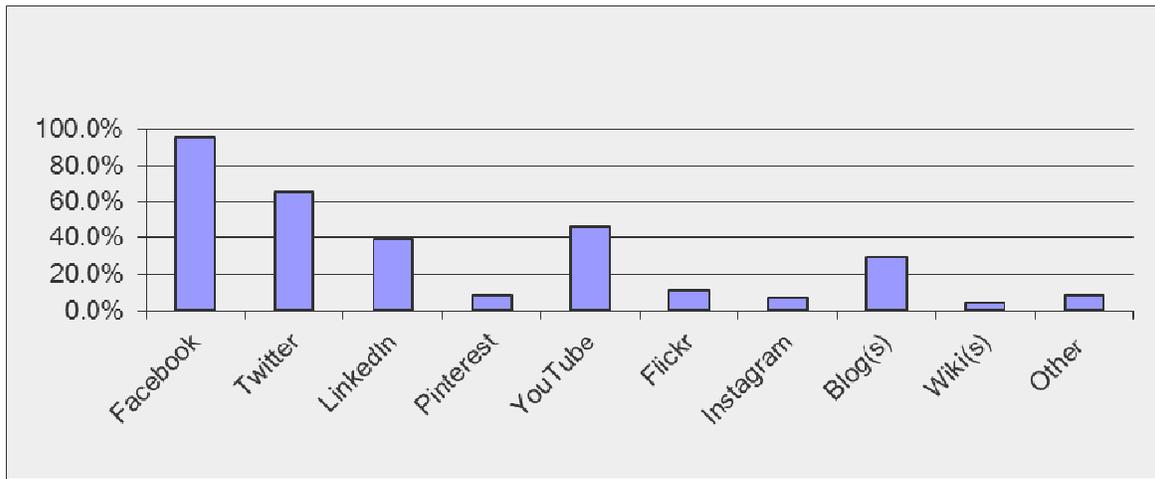


Figure 2. Percentage of tools/platforms used by those respondents that use social media

that Twitter was the more “versatile” social media tool, particularly for the task of engaging new audiences, communities, and influencers. Facebook, according to interview participants, was preferred only for the purpose of maintaining existing relationships with volunteers, donors and clients (Ibid). This might suggest that the majority of NPOs (represented in the online survey sample) currently use social media for the primary purpose of maintaining existing relationships and partnerships within the community, and that the goal of expanding influence to new people or groups is secondary. Indeed, when asked why they used social media, the top two responses from 211 respondents (95%) indicated it was in order “to interact with our community”. A marginally smaller number (83.3%) of respondents cited “to tell ‘our story’” as a reason for using social media; this result may indicate that the value of social media for the purpose of sharing the organization’s story to engage new groups of individuals is increasing, a finding that is also corroborated by previous qualitative research (Given et al., 2013).

The survey also asked respondents to identify the tools that are the “most effective” and “least effective” for achieving specific tasks. In accordance with the results mentioned previously, the task respondents identified as being most effectively achieved overall through the use of social media was “to interact with our community” and the task of sharing the organization’s ‘story’ was the second most effective use of social media among respondents. Across the sample, Facebook was identified as the best tool for achieving each of these tasks by a significant margin, and was selected by 160 respondents as most effective specifically “to interact with our community”. By comparison, Twitter was selected as the most effective “to interact with our community” by only 33 respondents.

The dominance of Facebook as social media platform of choice among NPOs demands more scholarly attention; earlier research provides specific cases regarding the successful use of Facebook, *as well as* other social media (e.g., Twitter, YouTube, blogs), particularly for interacting with the community and telling the organization’s ‘story’ (e.g., Given et al., 2013). Even though Twitter emerged as the “most versatile” tool in these interviews (Forcier et al., 2013a), the findings of the online survey suggest that the benefits of other platforms such as Twitter and YouTube are either being overshadowed by Facebook or are proving less robust for the knowledge needs of most NPOs.

5. Conclusion

In addition to these findings, the data also document NPOs' use of social media as an information source for knowledge gathering, for soliciting donations, and to reach specific audiences. These key points and other findings will be addressed in the conference presentation. These survey results are valuable in providing a realistic snapshot of the current use and perceptions of popular social media among Canadian NPOs. As the survey comes to a close in early 2014, a more fulsome picture of use will emerge and will expand the boundaries of current understandings of social media for the purpose of KM. Overall, this project will contribute to the ultimate task of developing new approaches, methods and tools to support the needs of NPOs. This work will help us in our future endeavours conducting similar surveys with NPOs in other countries (e.g., Australia), connecting across borders to further our knowledge of KM and social media use in the non-profit sector at a global level.

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