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Leveraging Social Media for Social Good: Uses, Challenges & the Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

While print readership declines and television audiences fragment, social media platforms have undergone an unprecedented expansion. The increase in popularity of social media signifies a paradigm shift in the way communication takes place today across large sections of the world. While marketers are embracing the opportunities offered by online channels in their quest to reach out to consumers, social media can also be an effective platform for non-profit organizations to foster stakeholder engagement and integrate technology into their daily operations. Given their inherent resource constraints, non-profit organizations stand to reap significant benefits from deploying social media. The purpose of this study is to examine the potential of social media as a tool to be leveraged by non-profit organizations to achieve their objectives. Firstly, the paper explores the role that social media can play in helping non-government organizations for purposes such as raising awareness about their cause and efforts, dialogue and community engagement, advocacy, and fundraising. Next, the study discusses the challenges that non-government organizations must address to fully harness the potential of this new media. Finally, the paper puts forth a set of recommendations for non-government organizations aimed at helping them to fully leverage this emerging form of interactive communication.

KEYWORDS

Social media, Non-profits, Non-government Organizations, Community Engagement, Fundraising

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INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has had a transformative impact on both individuals and organizations. The internet has evolved into a dynamic platform through which individuals meet, exchange experiences, engage in discussions, deliberate, and seek entertainment (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The adoption of digital technologies is no longer restricted to technologically adept early adopters, instead, these technologies are being seamlessly used by ordinary individuals in their daily routines (Ryan & Jones, 2009).

From the marketing standpoint, numerous advantages are offered by the web that can enhance organizational performance. These include 24-hour online availability, global accessibility, compatibility with multimedia content, suitability for micro-marketing endeavours, interactivity, and readiness for integration (Rowley, 2004). Today, organizations are facing increasing pressure to transition their communication strategy from a model of selective dissemination to one of open conversation (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009). They are required to exhibit greater transparency with respect to the decision-making processes and prioritize member engagement, participation, and dialogue (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009).

Social media can be defined “as a group of Internet-based applications that are built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Also referred to as Web 2.0, it represents a multi-layered digital landscape that includes a wide variety of online platforms and applications that are designed to facilitate the creation, dissemination, and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Evans (2008) suggests that social media encompasses self-generated, authentic conversations among individuals pertaining to a specific subject of mutual interest which is predicated upon the thoughts and experiences of the participants.

Social media leads to the formation of a participatory culture where individuals contribute to the collective discourse, co-creation of knowledge, and establishment of virtual social networks. Transcending geographical and temporal limitations, social media platforms facilitate global communication and enable individuals to connect, form groups, and gather based on cultural and subcultural interests and social affiliations (Kozinets et al., 1999; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The interactive features offered by social media platforms provide opportunities for engagement, through which individuals can express their opinions, share experiences, and collaborate at various levels. A sense of

empowerment and inclusivity is created as a result of this interactivity which blurs the traditional boundaries between content creators and consumers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

From a marketing perspective, social media has had a significant impact on traditional promotion and advertising strategies, necessitating a shift to a more interactive and customer-centric approach. Organizations now have the opportunity to directly connect with their target audiences, seek feedback, and build meaningful relationships which ultimately influence consumer behaviour and shape brand perceptions (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

The ubiquitous adoption of social media channels has also ushered in a new era for non-government organizations, enabling them to explore novel and interactive avenues to connect and engage with their diverse stakeholders. These cost-effective and omnipresent channels offer non-government organizations invaluable opportunities to manage their public image and foster meaningful relationships with their target audience. These platforms also serve as a medium for networking for non-government organizations (Zorn et. al, 2011; Saxton et. al., 2015) and enables them to establish and nurture connections with different stakeholders (Saxton et. al., 2015). With an objective to reach marginalized and underprivileged sections of society, non-government organizations can play a vital role in advancing both social and economic objectives. As per Sen (1993), the non-government sector in India is characterized by its heterogeneity, encompassing various types of entities. These organizations operate across a range of sectors, such as poverty alleviation, education, healthcare, environmental conservation, women empowerment, and rural development. With their interactive features, social media channels facilitate stakeholder engagement, allowing non-government organizations to foster dialogue, solicit feedback, increase their reach, and gain an in-depth understanding of their community (Kent & Taylor, 1998). In a comprehensive study of 120 non-profit organizations in Washington, McMahon et. al (2011) concluded that to effectively compete for market visibility, non-government organizations must leverage interactive services such as Web 2.0 and social media. By implementing these platforms non-government organizations can increase their credibility and maintain relevance (McMahon et.al, 2011). However, it is vital to acknowledge the resource-related challenges, such as lack of specialized knowledge and expertise, that many non-government organizations face which may be preventing them from fully capitalizing on the opportunities offered by social media platforms.

STUDY PURPOSE

The present study aims to examine the potential of social media as a means for non-governmental organizations to achieve their multifarious objectives. With this aim that in view it examines the various broad goals that non-governmental organizations typically set out to achieve and the role that social media can play in helping them in this as well as in the more effective functioning of these organizations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study undertakes a review of the extant literature on the field as well as an examination of other online sources. The various applications of social media by non-governmental organizations identified were categorized into themes. Similarly, the challenges to social media use have also been categorized accordingly.

STUDY FINDINGS

In recent times, there has been a shift in the way individuals consume and engage with information. This evolution is largely due to the emergence of social networking technologies and social media platforms, which have altered the dynamics of interpersonal engagement and brand interactions. Moreover, the continuous evolution of the Internet has encouraged non-profit organizations to adapt their communication strategies, campaigning approaches, organizational structures, and fundraising methods (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009). A survey conducted among 409 non-profit public relations practitioners in Georgia, USA, found extensive adoption of social media channels within the sector with a mere five respondents refraining from using any social media platform (Curtis et al., 2010).

Non-governmental organizations have recognized the significance of social media in the achievement of their philanthropic endeavours. By leveraging social media platforms, these organizations can create awareness and disseminate information among stakeholders (Lovejoy et al., 2012). Moreover, they can promptly obtain valuable feedback regarding their actions and foster two-way communication, thereby facilitating the exchange of new ideas (Lovejoy et al., 2012). According to Ramanathan (2016), the employment of social media channels for awareness-building purposes is significantly more cost-effective compared to traditional channels and website banner ads. He advocates that leveraging social media can yield awareness outcomes at least tenfold cheaper than alternative promotional approaches.

Social media channels have emerged as valuable tools for non-governmental organizations, facilitating various functions such as program and event announcements (Waters et al., 2009; Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009; Auger, 2013), streamlining management functions (Waters et al., 2009), addressing stakeholder inquiries and requests (Auger, 2013) and expressing gratitude to individuals contributing to their mission (Auger, 2013). Furthermore, these channels foster collaboration among like-minded individuals, enabling them to form new NGOs (Briones et al., 2011). The interactive nature of social media also allows organizations to gather pertinent information through the comments of stakeholders, thereby improving decision-making processes and strengthening engagement and loyalty (Waters & Lo, 2012).

According to Seo et al. (2009), the integration of social media tools into the public relations efforts of non-governmental organizations augments their overall image and facilitates resource expansion. As an example, the American Red Cross Society has adopted various social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Blogs, as noted by Briones et al. (2011). These tools are effectively used by the organization to actively engage with media, cultivate and maintain relationships with volunteers, and disseminate critical information to the community pertaining to disaster preparedness (Briones et al., 2011). In India, various non-governmental organizations including the Centre for Social Research, Youth Ki Awaaz, Learning Links Foundation, Breakthrough, Akshaya Patra Foundation, Pratham, Goonj, Sammaan, and Charities Aid Foundation have demonstrated the adept utilization of Facebook as a powerful tool (Das, 2017). These non-government organisations have effectively employed the platform for initiatives related to online safety, capacity-building programs, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) endeavours (Das, 2017).

Social Media and Community Engagement

Social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, have emerged as important avenues for organizations to develop relationships and facilitate engagement with stakeholders and the community at large (Briones et al., 2011; Miller, 2011; Auger, 2013). One of the main advantages of social media channels is their ability to broadcast messages instantaneously to a vast audience. This instant communication, as highlighted by Ramanathan (2016), allows organizations to disseminate information in real-time and space. Therefore, it enables them to effectively engage with current and prospective clients, donors, and stakeholders (Kanter & Fine, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

In addition to being interactive and dynamic, social media channels offer a cost-effective alternative to traditional communication methods. Implementing social media platforms requires fewer resources and less specialized knowledge compared to other technologies. This affordability factor makes social media an attractive tool for organizations that have limited budgets and technological expertise. Through social media platforms, non-governmental organizations are able to establish reciprocal relationships with stakeholders and mobilize supporters within a limited timeframe. Cho et al. (2014) and Rodriguez et al. (2014) recognize the role social media plays in facilitating stakeholder engagement and mobilization.

The advantages that social media offers outweigh those of traditional communication methods, as asserted by Ramanathan (2016). The characteristics of social media, including its low cost, ease of use and learning, and minimal infrastructure requirements, contribute to its appeal as a tool for information dissemination media (Waters et al., 2011; Guo & Saxton, 2014). Waters et al. (2011) and Guo & Saxton (2014) claimed that these characteristics make social media an attractive choice compared to traditional media. Large non-governmental organizations demonstrate a preference for using social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, over websites when engaging with stakeholders (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). In a study conducted by Saxton and Waters (2014) focusing on the use of Facebook by 100 prominent non-profit organizations in the United States, it was found that messages that emphasize networking, relationship-building, and community development through interactive dialogue are perceived more favourably by the public and elicit higher response rates compared to messages that primarily focus on dissemination of information.

A content analysis of 275 non-profit organizations' Facebook posts conducted by Waters et al. (2009) showed that these organizations have not fully capitalized on the interactive nature and relationship cultivation opportunities that Facebook offers. Similarly, Water and Jamal (2011) studied the communication practices of 200 non-profit organizations on Twitter and found that these organizations primarily use Twitter as a platform for sharing information, failing to fully leverage its interactive nature and community-building capabilities. A study by Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton (2012) on the use of Twitter among large non-profit organizations in the United States revealed that Twitter is mainly employed as a one-way communication channel, lacking the potential to enhance stakeholder involvement. Furthermore, Bortree and Seltzer (2009), in their examination of 50 Facebook accounts created by environmental advocacy groups, found out that these organizations rely on the creation of an interactive space through social networking platforms, mistakenly assuming it will be enough for engaging in dialogue with stakeholders. However, these organizations often fail to effectually apply the

dialogic strategies that are offered by social networking channels, thereby missing out on opportunities to develop mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders.

The potential of social media platforms as a tool for community engagement has been well recognized by Indian NGOs like Akshaya Patra Foundation, Pratham Education Foundation, Teach for India, and Goonj. These NGOs are using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, to engage with their communities and create a sense of belongingness amongst the stakeholders. Visually appealing images, videos, and storytelling techniques are being used to capture the attention and induce emotions in their audience, thereby encouraging them to engage and contribute to the cause.

Advocacy on social media by Non-government organizations

Social media channels have become significant platforms that are utilized extensively by non-profit organizations to raise awareness about stakeholder-related issues, promote their causes, and establish supportive networks. Obar et. al. (2012) conducted a survey of 169 individuals from 53 advocacy groups in the United States, revealing that the popularity and widespread reach of social media enables these groups to connect with a wide range of individuals, including existing supporters, potential members, and previously unaware individuals. Social media tools have significantly facilitated engagement in advocacy efforts and campaigns for both organizations and individuals (Guo & Saxton, 2012). For instance, the Causes application on Facebook allows users to share information about the non-governmental organizations they support, thereby increasing awareness about various causes (Goecks et al., 2008). Social media platforms provide organizations with an opportunity to foster collective action and build large, distributed collaborative groups (Shirky, 2008). Greenberg and MacAulay's (2009) study examining 43 Canadian environmental non-profit organizations concluded that these organizations are increasingly leveraging social media platforms to establish networks of collaborators and expand their conscientious constituencies. In Auger's (2013) study on the use of social media by non-profit organizations, it was found that social media platforms contribute to the development of a democratic space for ideas. Additionally, social media channels were employed by organizations to make ethical arguments and persuade individuals, rather than engaging in propaganda-like activities.

Indian NGOs recognize the massive potential offered by social media platforms as a tool for advocacy. Greenpeace India uses visually appealing content and compelling storytelling to increase awareness about environmental issues. Breakthrough India uses social media platforms to challenge

social norms and promote gender equality using powerful videos and interactive content. HelpAge India uses social media platforms to raise awareness about issues associated with aging and advocates for the rights of senior citizens and raise awareness about aging issues. These examples highlight how Indian NGOs have effectively utilized social media platforms to disseminate their advocacy efforts and advocate for social causes.

Fund-raising on social media by Non-government organizations

Non-governmental organizations depend heavily on donations as a primary source of income to support their daily operations and fulfil their mission (Guo, 2007). Conventionally, face-to-face interactions were the common method used by organizations to raise funds. However, with the advent of social media new and improved opportunities are available for NGOs to engage in fundraising activities. Online fundraising has proven to be more cost-effective in comparison to offline methods. While offline fundraising can cost up to \$1.25 to generate \$1, online fundraising costs as little as five cents (Khoury, 2007). Additionally, research shows that the average age of donors who prefer online channels is 39 years, while those who prefer offline modes are typically 60 years or older, indicating a preference for online channels among the next generation of donors (Goecks et al., 2008).

Goecks et al. (2008) highlight the dual role of social media channels in fundraising for non-profit organizations. Indirectly, social media platforms enable NGOs to communicate the activities they perform and demonstrate how funding contributes to achieving their mission. This information helps prospective donors develop trust and confidence in the organization, fostering a relationship with them (Goecks et al., 2008). Additionally, with the help of technology and social media platforms donors are able to discover smaller, lesser-known NGOs, increasing the likelihood of funding for these organizations (Goecks et al., 2008). In terms of the direct role, the donation process is simplified for individuals using social media platforms. For example, the "Donate Now" feature on an NGO's Facebook page reduces the number of clicks required to donate, thereby streamlining the process (Goecks et al., 2008). This ease has been instrumental in generating substantial funding. Ramanathan (2016) reports that the "donate now" feature on the Facebook page enables non-profit organizations to receive 25-30 daily clicks and enables them to raise between Rs. 80 crores to Rs. 100 crores annually, out of which online channels contribute approximately Rs. 12 crores.

Using social media platforms for fundraising allows organizations to leverage social network effects, peer pressure, social proof, and impulse donations (Nah & Saxton, 2012; Axelrad, 2015;

Appleby, 2016). Crowd funding platforms such as Crowd Rise and Go Fund Me provide access to a huge network of potential donors and offer user-friendly platforms for direct donations to causes and organizations. The speed and ease of online giving through crowd funding and social networking sites facilitate impulse-based donations (Nah & Saxton, 2012; Appleby, 2016). Moreover, through social networking platforms individuals can publicly share their support, loyalty, commitment, and donations to causes with their online network of friends. This show of support creates perceived social pressure and increases the likelihood of others in the network following suit which is referred to as the social network effect (Nah & Saxton, 2013) and social proof (Axelrad, 2015). Nah & Saxton (2013) note that there is a higher level of trust and likelihood of giving when donation requests come from someone known to the individual. Additionally, individuals act as solicitors for causes they support in peer-to-peer fundraising. Visibility and transparency of these solicitations on social network channels trigger impulses and peer pressure, increasing the likelihood of individuals exposed to online appeals to make donations.

Indian NGOs across different sectors have harnessed the power of social media to drive donations. By using persuasive content, running targeted campaigns, providing secure online donation options, and engaging with their audience, organizations like CRY (Child Rights & You), Help Age India, and The Wildlife Trust of India have successfully used social media platforms as fundraising tools to support their respective causes.

Barriers to using social media

As social media channels continue to gain eminence, it is becoming increasingly important for non-government organizations to develop strategies and tactics to harness the full potential of these platforms. The American Red Cross Society serves as a successful example of leveraging social media efficaciously. By actively responding to posts and incorporating suggestions from various stakeholders, the organization has achieved faster service delivery to the community, increased media coverage, and received valuable feedback for continuous improvement (Briones et al., 2011). However, many NGOs are still not fully employing social media due to various barriers and constraints. Some of the challenges faced by non-government organizations are mentioned below

- **Limited Resources:** The adoption rate of social media among NGOs remains remarkably low, primarily due to resource constraints. While the costs of hardware and software for adopting social media are declining, maintaining and upgrading technological infrastructure can be

financially burdensome, particularly for smaller NGOs (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009). The scarcity of resources limits the ability of NGOs to fully exploit the potential of social media (Corder, 2001)

- **Staffing and Expertise:** The effective adoption of social media by NGOs is hindered by the inadequate availability of employees with the necessary time and technological proficiency (Waters et al., 2009; Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009; Briones et al., 2011). The dynamic nature of social media demands a significant time commitment from staff and volunteers. Furthermore, utilizing social media channels to their fullest potential requires intermediate to advanced technological proficiency, which may not always be readily available within the organization (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009). Limited availability of personnel posed challenges for social media management within NGOs, as staff members juggle multiple communication and public relations tasks (Hou & Lampe, 2015). While the importance of social media management is acknowledged by organizations, it is just one aspect among numerous responsibilities of the staff, leading to the adoption of a collective "all hands-on deck" approach rather than having dedicated personnel solely focused on social media management (Hou & Lampe, 2015)
- **Reporting and Evaluation Demands:** NGOs face pressures from donors and funders to meet reporting and evaluation requirements (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009). Non-government organizations are expected to function with higher efficiency and demonstrate quantifiable outcomes. However, measuring the impact of social media in terms of communication and engagement, collaborations, and actions remains challenging, as these aspects are often qualitative in nature.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS

To effectively leverage the benefits of social media, non-government organisations can take the following steps

- **Developing a Strategy:** To effectively utilize social media, non-government organizations must develop a methodically planned strategy. According to Saxton & Wang (2013), it is important for NGOs to capitalize on their inherent strengths by conducting a comprehensive assessment of their current capacities and internal capabilities. In order to give their social media efforts direction, NGOs should evaluate their current position, envision their desired future state, and establish specific goals and objectives relating to social media. Kanter & Paine (2012) stress the importance of clearly

defining goals and setting measurable objectives to facilitate the implementation and evaluation of the social media strategy seamlessly. Before the strategy is formulated, NGOs must identify the members of their social media team and evaluate their expertise and level of comfort in managing social media platforms. It is significant for the organization to foster consensus among the employees involved regarding the content and predominant message of the social media campaign. A well-defined, coherent, and easily understandable plan among employees enables the organization to convey a consistent message and meticulously work towards achieving its goals. Saxton & Wang (2013) emphasize the importance of providing consistent, unified, and complementary content across all social media channels, as this fosters cross-channel synergy and an echo effect, maximizing the influence of the organization's online presence.

- **Building Relationships and Engagement:** Non-government organizations should participate in reciprocal communication to build relationships and connect with existing and new networks. It is vital for NGOs to demonstrate their gratitude for their audience and show that they value their support. NGOs should actively respond to comments, feedback, and questions from members within their social network (Kanter & Fine, 2012). By engaging in discussions and sharing details of current events and relevant sector-related happenings, NGOs can attract the attention of new stakeholders. Through multi-dimensional conversations, NGOs can build connections with other organizations, interest groups, and communities that may not have been possible through traditional media channels (Kanter & Fine, 2010). To maximize financial and human support, NGOs must provide their audience with pertinent information, and opportunities to participate, and express thankfulness to their audience members (Axelrad, 2015). Furthermore, NGOs should encourage participants to share their involvement in their personal networks, thereby creating social proof of legitimacy and increasing the probability of their contacts following suit.
- **Evaluation and Fine-Tuning of Social Media Strategy:** NGOs must continuously evaluate their social media efforts and use the insights attained to improve their strategies. Kanter & Fine (2012), as well as Saxton & Wang (2013), have emphasized the importance of monitoring and evaluating social media campaigns. A culture of learning through implementation and evaluation should be cultivated by NGOs, enabling them to assess whether their social media initiatives are successfully contributing to their goals and objectives. It is vital for NGOs to employ both quantitative and qualitative metrics to measure effectiveness. While quantitative metrics provide data that is measurable, qualitative metrics, such as perception, reputation, social change, and engagement, should also be assessed by

NGOs (Kanter & Paine, 2012). This comprehensive evaluation approach ensures a well-rounded understanding of the influence of social media campaigns on the organization's overall efficiency.

CONCLUSION

A shift has in the way information consumption and interaction among individuals takes place has taken place in the last few years. This shift, caused by the advent and proliferation of social media platforms has compelled non-profit organizations to adapt their communication strategies and fundraising methods. Numerous NGOs have identified the intrinsic value of social media as a cost-effective mechanism for generating awareness among stakeholders and obtaining invaluable feedback. Various functions are performed by social media platforms for NGOs, including event announcements, streamlining management functions, expressing gratitude to contributors, and addressing stakeholder inquiries. Additionally, these platforms facilitate collaboration among like-minded individuals and improve decision-making processes.

At first, non-profit organizations were slow to adopt and employ information technology due to the specialized skills required to use the technology efficiently and the inherent cost associated with it (Zorn et al., 2011). However, the dot-com bubble and the growth of social media platforms brought about a substantial shift and established social media channels as significant avenues for non-profit organizations to communicate with their donors, beneficiaries, communities, and other stakeholders (Hackler & Saxton, 2007). This shift extends beyond the traditional one-way communication approach that was employed by non-profit organizations, where they solely broadcast their mission and evolved into a dynamic and interactive dialogue, where the organization's positioning and branding is formed by the viewpoints of both supporters and critics

Despite the advantages, the use of social media's full potential within the NGO context is impeded by certain barriers. Chief among these obstacles are limited resources, inadequate staffing, and a shortage of technological expertise, all of which hinder the effective integration of social media into organizational practices. Furthermore, NGOs face challenges associated with the maintenance of infrastructure and modernization and the recruitment of dedicated personnel who are proficient in managing social media channels.

Despite the increased adoption of social media among non-governmental organizations, several questions relating to this new medium persist. With a view to expanding the understanding of social media platforms among non-government organizations, this study aims to highlight the benefits and

challenges that are associated with the adoption and use of social media platforms. The study also offers recommendations to non-governmental organizations to enable them to leverage the potential of this new media. However, additional research is needed to provide direction and offer guidance to non-governmental organizations so that social media platforms can be used efficaciously.

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