

Chapter 2

Social Media and Social Change: Nonprofits and Using Social Media Strategies to Meet Advocacy Goals

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ABSTRACT

Technological advances in communications tools, the Internet, and the advent of social media have changed the ways in which nonprofit organizations engage with their various constituents. Nonprofits now have a constellation of tools including: interactive social media sites, mobile applications (apps), Websites, and mash-ups that allow them to create a comprehensive system for mobilizing supports to advocate for changing public policies. From Facebook to Twitter and from YouTube to Pinterest, communicating to many via words and images has never been easier. The authors explore the history of nonprofit advocacy and organizing, describe the social media and technology tools available for moving advocacy goals forward, and conclude with some possible challenges that organizations considering these tools could face.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores how social media and related technology tools are used by nonprofit social service organizations to mobilize constituents and drive policy change. Building on a twenty year process of incorporating earlier technology into social change activities, the Web 2.0/Social Media revolution has had an impact on nonprofit

organizations who are uniquely suited to reach under-represented communities.

In this chapter, we will look at how nonprofit social services organizations engage in advocacy using the broad range of social media, Web 2.0, and other technological applications. We will explore the available tools and look at how these applications have been used in campaigns and efforts to impact policy change. Finally, we will

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8614-4.ch002

explore the issues that are involved in using social media in nonprofit efforts to engender social justice outcomes. Social service organizations are not only a substantial component of the nonprofit sector, they represent the part of the sector with immediate exposure to many problematic social conditions as well as a conduit, via the communities they serve, to large populations of under-represented groups of people.

ADVOCACY IN THE NONPROFIT SOCIAL SERVICES SECTOR

Nonprofit social service organizations have historically worked with the poor and oppressed in society (Trattner 2007). They are at the center of hot button issues such as poverty, domestic violence, immigration, health care reform and so forth. While much of this is direct service related, nonprofit organizations also engage in advocacy to change policies and protect the vulnerable (Berry & Arons, 2002; Jenkins, 1987; Libby, 2011; Bass, Arons, Guinane, & Carter, 2007). This means that these organizations have become adept at organizing communities, creating media campaigns, lobbying lawmakers and raising public awareness about issues and problems. This effort dovetails with the efforts of social movement organizations who have broader social change goals.

Advocacy or the constellation of activities which positions individuals and organizations in the public sphere to create dialog and change on behalf of communities and populations of individuals is often thought to be a core activity of the nonprofit social services sector. Yet a growing body of research suggests that nonprofit engagement in policy advocacy activities is often far less than expected (Mosley, 2010; Berry & Arons, 2002; Bass, Arons, Guinane & Carter, 2007).

The broad umbrella of advocacy as a collection of behaviors also includes a range of goals that organizations may wish to achieve. These activities might be characterized as more self-interested

organizational advocacy (e.g., advocacy to protect agency funding) in contrast to progressive advocacy, defined as advocacy addressing underlying structural and power inequities (Donaldson, 2008). Progressive advocacy's goal is to advance the interests of a non-profit's constituents, rather than the organization's interests, and fully engages constituents in the advocacy process (Donaldson, 2008).

Many of these activities use traditional social change methodologies: community organization, lobbying, administrative advocacy, judicial intervention and so forth (Berry & Arons, 2002; Libby, 2011; Hoefer, 2000; Bass, Arons, Guinane & Carter 2007). In the last two decades, however, the use of information and communication technology has become a staple of nonprofit advocacy (McNutt & Bolland, 1999; Hick & McNutt, 2002; McNutt, 2011). Organizations have adapted traditional organizing or advocacy activities to function in the electronic environment, for example, moving letter writing campaigns online or creating online petition drives and more media sophisticated organizations are making use of advanced interactive and networked technologies in attempts to drive social change.

TECHNOLOGY AND NONPROFIT SOCIAL SERVICES ADVOCACY

The use of technology to promote advocacy goals has been around at least since the late 1980s and there is now a substantial literature to draw upon. Early efforts, such as Peace Net and community networking gave form to an activity that has revolutionized political campaigning and transformed the way that nonprofits, throughout the world, have conducted their advocacy activities. Early literature (Downing, Fasano, Friedland, McCollough, Mizrahi & Shapiro, 1991; Schuler, 1991; 1996; Wittig & Schmitz, 1996; Yerxa & Moll, 1994) looks at the use of pre-Internet and early Internet networking.

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