

Civic Engagement through Social Media: Strategic Stakeholder Management by High-Asset Foundations

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ABSTRACT

Civic engagement through social media is a strategy employed by nonprofits typically using one-way targeted information dissemination to stakeholder groups. Improving the quality of communities and ameliorating social problems sustain nonprofit foundation missions, suggesting that two-way dialogic communication inspiring action is preferable for effective civic engagement over one-way communication. Using Facebook content analyses for three types of foundations—community, corporate, and independent grant making foundations—the authors employ a Relationship Management Theory (RMT) approach to assess effective civic engagement. RMT emphasizes the organization's dynamic interactions with stakeholder publics (Ledingham, 2003). The authors code posts according to whether they ask stakeholders to act (e.g. - asking users to respond to a question or share information). Using a quantitative modeling approach, they determine whether posts requesting stakeholder action are more likely to result in stakeholder engagement with posts. They examine type of post- status updates, external links, and multimedia- to determine whether type of post is also related to civic engagement. Facebook data for 300 randomly sampled high asset-foundations were accessed using a social media analytics program. Overall, the authors find that private and corporate foundations are more likely to use social media on average. However, community foundations are more likely to use social media as a call to action. This study informs foundations and the larger nonprofit community on how to apply such techniques to their own organizations for continuous improvement in supporting their missions and civic engagement goals. This study is also germane to other types of nonprofit and public organizations seeking to increase stakeholder engagement with social media platforms.

KEYWORDS

Civic Engagement, Facebook, Foundations, Relationship Management Theory, Social Media, Stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we seek to understand civic engagement by nonprofit foundations through social media. Broadly, civic engagement refers to citizen participation in their communities with the purpose of improving the community (Adler and Goggin, 2005; Carboni, McNeely, & Maxwell, 2015). Although civic engagement is often applied to political participation, the term also relates to individual and collective action through civil society. Civil society includes the institutions and organizations that individuals voluntarily associate with to advance common interests (Anheier 2005; Skocpol & Fiorina 1999). Civil society is distinct from government and business and includes nonprofit organizations.

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In the United States, nonprofit foundations are an important vehicle for civic engagement as they provide organizational mechanisms for individuals to improve communities. Nonprofit foundations typically provide grant funding to nonprofits, individuals and communities for scientific, educational, cultural, religious, or other charitable purposes. Foundations act as intermediaries, funding nonprofits in tandem or independently of government (Riely & Kraft, 2010). Although most are not in formal relationships with government, foundations often serve an agenda-setting role in targeting social problems and proposing solutions for ameliorating community and larger social ills (Duan-Barnett, Wangelin, & Lamm, 2012).

Increasingly foundations use social media to engage with citizens and other stakeholders. While some literature exists on social media usage among nonprofits generally and foundations specifically, there is limited evidence about how online stakeholders engage with nonprofit social media. Online stakeholders are those who converse via social media with organizations. They may or may not be active in additional organizational activities. We view social media as a tool for relationship management that may facilitate civic engagement with online stakeholders. We ask: Are foundations simply posting information on social media sites such as Facebook, or is there a conversation taking place between the organization and its stakeholders? Engagement via social media sites such as Facebook is defined differently from use in this context. Simply having a social media site does not mean users or stakeholders are actively *engaged* with the organization that manages the social media platform. Are foundations' stakeholders responding to foundation Facebook posts? Are they civically engaged in an online conversation about their communities?

We study high asset corporate, non-corporate-private, and community foundations to determine how foundations use social media to engage online stakeholder citizens. While all foundations serve charitable purposes, corporate and non-corporate, or private foundations are typically funded by an endowment or principal fund, often with a single source. Conversely, community foundations are nonprofit organizations with public charity status that receive funding from numerous sources. To maintain public charity status, they must seek funds from diverse sources. We hypothesize that community foundations will be more likely to promote online civic engagement through social media than their corporate and private counterparts because of the need to secure diverse streams of funding. We also predict that online stakeholders will be more engaged with community foundation social media than with corporate or private foundations.

Civic engagement assumes a level of two-way dialogue, as engagement is not listening; it entails a response. Social media engagement is defined as responses from foundation stakeholders on "social media sites" or social networking sites. This study focuses on Facebook as the social media site due to the overwhelming adoption of Facebook by the nonprofit sector. Foundations fall within the nonprofit sector, encompassing private, corporate, or community foundations whose missions are generally to help ameliorate social problems within their communities (Bennett, 2014). In a study of advocacy organizations, Obar, Zube, and Lampe (2012) find that advocacy organizations interact with social media frequently. Foundations are situated to adopt social media techniques used by advocacy organizations, incorporating various Facebook, Twitter, or other social media sites to engage their stakeholders.

This paper proceeds as follows: First, we review extant scholarship on social media and civic engagement. Next, we review foundations and their role in civic engagement. We present Relationship Management Theory in the following section, linking social media engagement to the development of civic engagement by foundation stakeholders. We then present the research methodology and quantitative analysis of organizational Facebook post content, indicating which foundation posts elicit responses by stakeholders. The conclusion offers practical ideas for foundations, working in partnership with public agencies to promote civic engagement through social media strategies.

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