



Assessing the evolutionary structure of homeless network: Social media use, keywords, and influential stakeholders



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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand how social media is used over time by a community network associated with the implementation of federal homeless policy in the U.S. In addition, this study explores the structure of the social media network that evolves over time. Drawing on previous social media and network research, longitudinal data from 2009 to 2013 was gathered from the Facebook page of a homeless network in the Dallas Metropolitan Area and the case was analyzed using social network analysis methods. Results indicate that the homeless network tends to use social media to raise awareness of homelessness issues, to market the homeless network, to solicit the help of stakeholders, and engage external stakeholders. In addition, the structure of the social media network tends to evolve into a set of reciprocal interactions among stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

The use of social media by public and nonprofit organizations has recently garnered the attention of scholars in the field of public and nonprofit management (Campbell et al., 2014; Cho et al., 2013; Guo and Saxton, 2014; Jung et al., 2015; Maxwell and Carboni, 2014). This is because social media promises to be an inexpensive and relatively easy tool that can help an organization become networked with its internal and external stakeholders, and by so doing, increasing its capacity to respond to the ills of society (Kanter and Paine, 2012). For example, the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) Association recently used social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter to creatively raise awareness of ALS in communities nationwide by challenging people to get doused with a bucket of ice water on video and/or make a monetary donation. Since the summer of 2014, the ALS Association has received \$115 million in donations. Here, the ALS Association by becoming *networked* through its use of social media, was able to raise awareness of it cause and a commensurable amount of funding for its research, services and other philanthropic activities; thus, increasing its capacity to achieve its mission and vision.

Successful cases of organizations using social media such as ALS have sparked the interest of scholars and practitioners alike to explore the dynamics of social media use and its impact on public and nonprofit organizations. Considering the relative newness of social media tools, however, it is not surprising that scholarly research on social media

use in the fields of public and nonprofit management is still very much under development. Scholarship to date has predominantly focused on understanding the extent to which public and nonprofit organizations use social media tools and exploring factors that explain the adoption of social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter (Campbell et al., 2014; Li and Feeney, 2014; Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012; Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013). Less is known, however, about *how* social media is used by public and nonprofit organizations (Guo and Saxton, 2014; Maxwell and Carboni, 2014). Even less is known about how a network of organizations uses social media to advance its collective mission and vision (Maxwell and Carboni, 2014).

Exploring the relationship between social media use and networks is important when today, networked collaboration is often the encouraged or required form of program implementation by public policy (O'Toole and Meier, 2004). Maxwell and Carboni (2014) add to this line of inquiry and find that a nonprofit organization functioning as the coordinating actor within a service implementation network tends to rely more heavily on traditional methods of communication (i.e., face to face contact) to engage external stakeholders as opposed to emergent forms of communication (i.e., social media). Still, the literature has not adequately explored how a network uses social media over time or the structure of relationships that ensue over social media network within the context of public policy.

This research, therefore, responds to this gap in the public and nonprofit scholarship and pursues the following research questions: 1) how does a network of organizations use social media over time? and 2) what is the structure of the social media network that develops over time? In order to address these research questions, we study the social media use of a collaborative network within the context of a

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federal policy—the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009—which encourages American communities to create Continuum of Care or homeless networks to address the incidence of homelessness. Drawing on previous social media and network research, longitudinal data (2009–2013) was gathered from the Facebook page of a homeless network in the Dallas Metropolitan Area and the case was analyzed using social network analysis methods. Results indicate that the homeless network tends to use social media to raise awareness of homelessness issues and that the social media network tends to evolve into a set of reciprocal interactions.

This research is organized in five sections. First, we provide a review of the literature on networks and social media use in the public and nonprofit sector from which we draw testable propositions. Second, a brief discussion is presented on the context of the study. In the third section, we discuss our choice of research design, data and methods. The fourth section reports the findings of our research along with a discussion of the results. The last section is comprised of the conclusion, a discussion of our research limitations and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical considerations

2.1. Defining network concepts

In the last two decades, research on networks has flourished in the fields of public and nonprofit management. While much confusion still exists in the extant literature on what a network is, we follow the work of other scholars who define networks as structures of multi-sector actors working to jointly implement public policy (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001; Chen, 2008; Keast et al., 2004; O'Toole, 1997; Provan and Milward, 2001). This definition of a network is not dissimilar to the concept of collaboration, which broadly refers to two or more organizations working to accomplish goals that they would otherwise be unable to tackle (Gazley, 2008; Jang et al., 2014; McGuire, 2006). Thus, we use both concepts interchangeably.

In this study, we also discuss a similar network concept—social media network—which refers to the set of relationships that evolve over social media outlets such as Facebook or Twitter through the interaction of users (i.e., liking or responding to a comment) (Jung and Park, 2014; Jung et al., 2015; Kanter and Paine, 2012). Differentiating between a network of organizations and a social media network is conceptually important. This is because member organizations of a network may not necessarily be engaged on social media. In other words, stakeholders of a social media network may not reflect the stakeholders involved in a network of organizations. In this research, we study the use of social media by a network of organizations working to reduce the incidence of homeless as well as the social media network that develops over time.

2.2. Communication in network of organizations

The interest in the study of organizational networks has been sparked in part by its presumed prevalence in practice (Berry et al., 2004) and its desirability when collaboration can help organizations survive in turbulent times through the pooling of resources and information (Gazley, 2010; Guo and Acar, 2005). Collaboration can result in benefits such as improved organizational survival, institutional legitimacy, the ability to address challenging community problems, cost benefits, and relationship building opportunities (Gazley and Brudney, 2007; Sowa, 2009). A growing body of research that explores the dark side of collaboration, however, has challenged the notion that collaboration is always good (Guo and Acar, 2005; Jang et al., 2014). Jang et al. (2014), for example, find that a nonprofit and its partners face collaboration challenges when communication between partner organizations occurs in an ad-hoc and informal manner. This is problematic because

ineffective communication can result in the absence of mutual collaboration goals and objectives (Jang et al., 2014).

Network management, therefore, has become an emergent area of scholarly interest (Jang et al., 2014; McGuire and Silvia, 2009; Milward and Provan, 2006). Milward and Provan (2006), for example, argue that there are certain management practices that are unique to managing a network such as the management of conflict, legitimacy, design or structure, and commitment. What these practices have in common is the importance of communication between not only internal stakeholders but also external ones. Communication between members of a network, for example, is key to resolving conflicts among network members and building the commitment of the network membership (Milward and Provan, 2006). A network's communication with external stakeholders is likewise important in order to build legitimacy and support for the efforts of the network within a community. Maxwell and Carboni (2014) note that the "ability to collaborate effectively not only includes communication; it specifically requires purposeful communication, and many nonprofits have turned to social media to better communicate with stakeholder groups" (303). Our interest in this study is to further understand how a network of organizations uses social media over time and how the social media network structure also develops over a period of time.

2.3. Social media use by organizations & networks

We follow the work of Chun and Luna Reyes (2012) and define social media as "applications built on Web 2.0 technologies that are internet-based and designated to promote the content generation by the users and to facilitate the sharing and diffusion of information through social linking and interactions" (441). These Web 2.0 technologies, which include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn, allow users to not only connect with other individuals and/or organizations, but also facilitate the sharing and exchanging of information. For example, a user can "like" the Facebook page of an organization and stay up to date on its efforts, join events hosted by the organization, share the networks' posts/events with others, and post information on the network's wall. This then allows users to access information on the efforts of the organization and to further communicate this information with their own network of friends on the social media application. In addition, social media tools such as Facebook provide an organization with a relatively inexpensive mechanism by which to maintain its members engaged and informed (Maxwell and Carboni, 2014). The process by which a public organization adopts social media, however, is a much more complex one, which begins with an individual within the organization introducing a useful application to the institutionalizing of the technology as a communication tool (Park and Kluser, 2009; Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013).

While research on public and nonprofit organizations' social media use is still under development, recent scholarship has begun to explore the use of social media in these sectors. Li and Feeney (2014), for example, analyze factors that explain variation in the adoption of communication technologies among U.S. local governments, including the use of social networking tools (i.e., Twitter and Facebook), text messaging, audio webcasts, video webcasts, and e-mail. Monge and Poole (2008) also suggest that stakeholder pressure from entities such as citizens and organized groups is associated with an increased likelihood that communities are likely to adopt communication technologies. This finding comes without surprise when stakeholders are often interested in improving or enhancing their communication channels with the local government so as to ensure that their needs and interests are met.

A different study, however, found that local governments are less likely to use social media tools when compared to nonprofit organizations in the context of the delivery of human services (Campbell et al., 2014). Institutional barriers such as organizational policies, inappropriate target population, client confidentiality, and lack of capacity

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