

Information, Community, and Action: How Nonprofit Organizations Use Social Media*

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The rapid diffusion of “microblogging” services such as Twitter is ushering in a new era of possibilities for organizations to communicate with and engage their core stakeholders and the general public. To enhance understanding of the communicative functions microblogging serves for organizations, this study examines the Twitter utilization practices of the 100 largest nonprofit organizations in the United States. The analysis reveals there are three key functions of microblogging updates—“information,” “community,” and “action.” Though the informational use of microblogging is extensive, nonprofit organizations are better at using Twitter to strategically engage their stakeholders via dialogic and community-building practices than they have been with traditional websites. The adoption of social media appears to have engendered new paradigms of public engagement.

Key words: microblogging; Twitter; social media; stakeholder relations; organizational communication; organization-public relations; nonprofit organizations

doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01576.x

Prior studies (e.g., Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Saxton, Guo, & Brown, 2007) have shown that nonprofit organizations have not been able to use websites as strategic, interactive stakeholder engagement tools. Perhaps this was due to not having the know-how or the staff to create more interactive sites with feedback options and discussion boards. The advent of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have taken away this excuse. These sites are free and have built-in interactivity. Any organization big or small can create a site and start building a network of friends and followers with whom they are in almost real-time contact.

These newer social media applications present communication opportunities that differ dramatically from organizationally supported websites. The question, is, how are organizations using microblogging applications? We aim here to help answer this question and understand the various functions for which organizational microblogging is employed via an examination of the Twitter utilization practices of the 100 largest charitable organizations in the United States. First, based on an analysis of the tweets sent by the organizations in our sample, we develop an original typology of organizational microblogging functions. Second, we use this information to examine the relative frequency with which organizations

*Authors are listed in alphabetical order. The authors would like to thank Tom Feeley, Richard Waters, Seungahn Nah, I-hsuan Chiu, Yuchao Huang, and Kenton Anderson for helpful comments and suggestions.