Conclusion

Social media has revolutionized the way people make connections to one another and to the organizations they support. They are interactive technologies that allow even novice users the ability to generate content for others to see and respond to. Social media are rooted in the collective intelligence of many rather than the individual expertise of a few. Given these affordances, all nonprofit organizations (NPOs)—and essentially all organizations regardless of sector—will eventually come to use these tools to connect with their various stakeholders, build community, accomplish program and outreach goals, and help fulfill their missions. Kanter and Fine (2010) noted that for organizations to be successful in the 21st century they must become networked nonprofits—open and transparent entities that allow people to move freely in and out. Such organizations are more successful at raising awareness, organizing communities, and advocating for legislation. Social media help networked nonprofits build their social capital, expand their networks, provide channels for information dissemination, create marketing and fundraising campaigns, and provide advocacy conduits.

Yet, there is little empirical research on whether, how, or why NPOs use social media. The existing research has predominately been based on case studies and survey data on large NPOs with substantial budgets (e.g. Guo & Saxton, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Very little research has been done on social media use in small and medium NPOs (with a budget of less than $5 million)—although this appears to be changing. For example, social media and other technology surveys by the Nonprofit Technology Network now include organizations ranging from less than $5 million to more than $100 million. The cases in this book seek to add to the body of knowledge on social media use in NPOs, particularly for small and medium organizations, but also provide practical guidance for nonprofit practitioners and suggestions for more systematic research by scholars. Although the findings in each chapter are not necessarily generalizable to all NPOs, they are nonetheless instructive because they provide readers of this book with practical advice for adopting and using social media.

The cases in this book demonstrate the ways in which small and medium NPOs have adopted, integrated and used social media into their organizational systems. Some organizations adopted social media quickly in an effort to respond to a pressing
need (e.g. Tees for a Cause, Blue Star Families), but others were more systematic and developed social media strategic plans (e.g. Paws With A Cause, Vista Community Clinic, The Cummer Museum of Arts and Gardens, American Lung Association, Arizona, National Panhellenic Conference). Still others proceeded with caution (e.g. United Way of Chester County, Amnesty Norway, Wuhan FON) in an effort to navigate environmental uncertainties.

Findings from studies of large nonprofits suggest that NPOs are yet to fully tap into social media’s potential for interactivity (e.g. Guo & Saxton, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Waters et al., 2009). Particularly poignant is the fact that many do not engage in two-way dialogue with their online followers. Rather they simply use social media as a way to disseminate information. The data from the cases in this book support the findings of these large NPO studies, as many of the small and medium organizations did not effectively engage in interactive dialogue with their constituents either. Like larger organizations, these smaller NPOs also found social media adoption, integration and use to be both challenging and rewarding.

General challenges included ineffective utilization of social media; funding and staffing challenges; fear over a loss of control; and challenges to organizational culture and governance structures. Many of these challenges impacted the organization’s ability to engage in two-way dialogue with its constituents. Interactive communication requires a time consuming effort on the part of organizational members. And there is an inherent requirement to develop creative and interesting content. Small and medium NPOs may not have the organizational capacity to dedicate staff to social media nor staff who are comfortable and confident enough to generate content.

Further, it is often assumed that social media is free but there are hidden costs that many organizations fail to consider. Cohen (2013) explained that adopting social media has hidden costs including

- Social media engagement and maintenance (e.g. tailored content creation);
- Ensuring a stable brand across platforms;
- Ensuring social media content can be found by those who are looking for the organization (e.g. search engine optimization);
- Technology needs; and
- Social media analytics.

Each of these tasks takes staff and financial resources that many small and medium NPOs simply do not have. In addition, NPOs that rely on grant funding often do not receive monies for technology improvement or social media management, but these grants often expect such service upgrades.

Many of the organizations in the preceding chapters have also experienced very contextually-specific challenges. For example, Vista Community Clinic (VCC)
and Blue Star Families (BSF) experienced very specific challenges related to their organizational mission. VCC experienced challenges related to ensuring patient privacy and confidentiality according to the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, and BSF experienced challenges with connecting military families across the world. Regardless of the challenge, many of the organizations used specific ways to address their individual challenges and found opportunities to better incorporate social media into their organizations. This is likely to be helpful for nonprofit practitioners seeking to incorporate social media into their organizations. Tackling social media questions in a more systematic way can help improve knowledge and understanding of the impact of technological evolutions on NPOs. Regardless of what research indicates, without reliable data, there is no assurance of how, when, or whether NPOs are using social media effectively.

WHAT’S ON THE HORIZON

The World Wide Web is constantly in a state of evolution. Social media are just the most recent outcroppings of new pathways for human communication. It is expected that soon Web 3.0 will make its way on to the horizon. Web 3.0 refers to an intelligent web able to aggregate data quickly in order to act as a personal adviser to those who use it (Markoff, 2006). This can already be seen in the usage of tags on social media sites such as Flickr and delicious.com. Many NPOs simply will not be ready for this change as they often lag behind in effective utilization of Web 1.0 (static websites) and Web 2.0 (interactive social media). Although many of the consequences of falling behind in technology adoption are yet to be known, organizations will likely find that if they are not successful at using Web 1.0 or 2.0 technologies they will simply be lost in the plethora of web information competing for inclusion in the more intuitive web. In other words, if organizations are not active on the web, their constituents may not be able to find them.

Moreover, inactive NPOs may find themselves further down on the intuitive web hierarchy due to the changing legal landscape of the web. Up until recently, all Internet providers were prohibited from halting, slowing, or otherwise tampering with the transfer of any data under the common carrier provision of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). A federal court ruling in January 2014 stripped the FCC of its right to enforce this rule for broadband Internet providers. This ruling allowed Internet companies the ability to control what is sent over their networks (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.). The consequences of this ruling have yet to be realized. Some have reported it will limit the ability of web users to find the websites they are looking for because it creates a tiered system allowing Internet service providers to control which tier transfers specific types of content (Ganley &
Allgrove, 2006; Kang, 2014; Kim, 2014). To access higher tiered content, Internet users will likely be charged additional fees (for more on the net neutrality debate, see Ganley & Allgrove, 2006).

For small and medium NPOs, this could potentially mean their Web 1.0 content is never found. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter will be less likely to experience such data slowing or halting because they are powerful enough to engage in legal battles with Internet service providers. That being said, smaller social networking sites like Myspace or Ello may no longer be viable options because they do not have nearly as much clout as their larger counterparts.

To be better prepared for the uncertain web environment, NPOs need to establish a significant presence on the web using both Web 1.0 and 2.0 technologies in order to gain traction in the more intuitive web and be ready for the impact of legal issues surrounding net neutrality. They also need to determine how they will continue to sustain their organizational relevancy with the advent of new web-based technologies.

FUTURE AREAS FOR RESEARCH

While the information in the cases contained in this book is helpful and instructive for nonprofit staff and scholars, more systematic investigations are needed to better understand social media adoption and utilization in the nonprofit sector. Particularly, empirical research needs to focus on studying social media use in small and medium nonprofits. As of September 2014 organizations with less than $5 million in revenue accounted for 98% of all registered 501(c)(3) organizations, 72% of which reported having less than $100,000 in revenue (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2014). Systematic studies of these smaller organizations may help provide them with low-cost, effective strategies for implementing social media.

The authors in this book have suggested some possible areas for research. First and foremost, systematic research is needed to develop a better understanding of social media adoption and utilization, as well as the consequences of such adoption and utilization within and outside NPOs. Thus, scholars are encouraged to conduct quantitative cross-sectional or longitudinal studies using secondary data or original surveys or qualitative multi-case, mixed-methods studies.

Second, the evidence in this book suggests that social media pose significant challenges to an organization’s culture, traditions, governance, and capacity; this may present discomfort to the members of the organization and create resistance towards adopting social media. More empirical research is needed to determine if this is generalizable to all nonprofits or just a significant challenge for small and medium nonprofits. There are a variety of possible research areas in this regard. Some studies may investigate the effects of social media adoption and utilization

Conclusion
Conclusion

on governance structures, organizational culture, and cross-sectoral collaboration and outcomes. Other areas of research include comparative studies of social media adoption and utilization within NPOs in different sectors and countries. Further, researchers may investigate the relationship between social media adoption and utilization and organizational capacity. Other studies may seek to explore the relationship between team learning and social media adoption.

Third, in an era of shrinking funding from government and foundations, nonprofits of all sizes have had to rework their funding strategies in order to cover costs. As a result, many NPOs have turned to private donations using either large campaigns with small donations or targeting a “few high-worth donors” (Paik, 2012, para. 23). And many are using social media to initiate their campaigns. It will be important to empirically determine if this option is a viable source for revenue generation, particularly for small and medium nonprofits. In addition, future studies may examine the combined effect of a NPO’s social media infrastructure and donor support on the success of fundraising campaigns.

Fourth, future studies may undertake a more comprehensive examination of social media use as a tool for advocacy and civic engagement. Nonprofit organizations fulfill many functions in their communities. Part of their role is to advocate on behalf of those who cannot do so for themselves. As with most other aspects of nonprofit social media research, there is a dearth of evidence on the impact social media have on a NPO’s advocacy and civic engagement efforts. It is recommended that scholars seek to determine whether social media use has had a significant impact on government policy, increased civic engagement, or resulted in more participative forms of democracy.

Regardless of focus, systematic empirical research is needed to better understand the antecedents and consequences of social media adoption and utilization in the nonprofit sector. Future studies may seek to uncover the internal and external environmental factors that affect such adoption and utilization. They may also identify the impacts of social media adoption and implementation both within and outside nonprofit organizations. All of which will serve to better inform the practices of nonprofit organizations as they continue to evolve in the era of Web 2.0 technologies.

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Conclusion

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337