

PILOT CASE STUDY: HOW TWO NONPROFIT EDUCATION FOUNDATIONS USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO SUPPORT SYSTEMIC ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Easily available and widely used, social media tools look like a boon for small, nonprofit organizations that need systemic approaches for disseminating information and cultivating networks for donor and member engagement, especially those relying on a few paid staff and many good-hearted volunteers to do the work. This case study examines the experiences of two nonprofit organizations and the complexities, constraints, and contextual challenges that have made adopting social media practices more difficult and less effective than industry advisers, researchers, and examples suggest. Leaders of these two education foundations describe themselves as caught between the demands of tending key person-to-person relationships and the additional duties associated with cultivating interactive relational networks through social media. The experiences described in this instrumental case study align with themes found across trans-disciplinary research on social media and organizations. These themes are *social media*, *organizational capacity*, and the changing concept of *engagement*.

Keywords: nonprofit, social media, engagement, organizational capacity, complexity, systemic

HOW TWO NONPROFIT EDUCATION FOUNDATIONS USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO SUPPORT SYSTEMIC ENGAGEMENT

People in local communities and around the globe are coming together in new and powerful ways through social media to support charities and other social needs with money, supplies, petitions, and action (Sharma, 2015; Pyser, 2014; Crutchfield & McLeod, 2012). Nonprofit organizations face a variety of opportunities and challenges in light of this global and systemic phenomenon, as communication and interactions via social media span geographic, economic, and other boundaries to create and energize relationship networks that foster emotional, physical, and financial flows between people and social causes.

On one hand, social media has created new ways for organizations to communicate with a wider public. On the other hand, the interactive nature of social media requires so much more attention than traditional direct-mail appeals, and other one-way communication and fundraising approaches that many organizations are being forced to reflect on their strategies, culture, capacities, and environment as they adopt and use these platforms (Nah & Saxton, 2012)

High-profile social media campaigns, such as #ALSIceBucketChallenge, show the immense potential for fundraising through social media (Diamond, 2014). But now social cause campaigns from pet adoptions to emergency medical funds flow through Facebook and Twitter, with the implication, as emphasized in public relations, fundraising, and nonprofit management literature, that social media tools give any organization, no matter the size, new resources to reach more people on behalf of their social cause (Nah & Saxton, 2012; Carboni & Maxwell, 2015).

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However, even though surveys show that almost all nonprofits are using at least one type of social media (M + R NTEN, 2012), most organizations face multiple challenges to utilizing it effectively (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Waters & Jamal, 2011). One common finding is that despite the interactive nature of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, nonprofits tend to use social media platforms as billboards for one-way announcements. One of the factors limiting social media effectiveness is related to mindset, as nonprofit organizations use social media to “push” communication, retaining practices and assumptions based on the 20th century mass media system (Sharma, 2014). Other factors that nonprofit leaders identify as barriers to social media use include a lack of staff, knowledge, or resources; concerns about privacy, and questions about effectiveness (Carboni & Maxwell, 2015; Sharma, 2014).

As the research grows, some scholars view an organization’s struggles with social media to be an opportunity to look at the system, or ecosystem, of people and organizations that are engaged in the same social cause (Swindoll, 2015; Kanter & Fine, 2010; Kanter & Paine, 2011). But few are exploring the questions about whether a nonprofit’s struggles to use social media could also be related to the nature of its social cause, or the social systems it operates in.

This case study contributes to the growing body of research on how nonprofit organizations use social media to support engagement with social causes by taking a closer look at two education foundations. These nonprofits have ventured onto Facebook, but their leaders say the organizations lack the capacity to utilize it for communication and engagement, a common finding in other studies. This case study also identifies questions for future research, such as how organizations might evaluate their existing systems and practices for building and cultivating relationships and engagement to develop strategies for understanding the systemic nature of social media networks and for using social media more effectively.

Background & Rationale

Parent-teacher organizations, booster clubs, and school foundations are familiar community partners in most school districts. Over the past 20 years, philanthropic support for public K-12 education has increased more than in any other charitable sector, with more than a third of charities established in the past 40 years having been formed to support public schools (Gazley, 2015; Nelson & Gazley, 2014). As public school funding continues to decline (O’Sullivan, 2014; Paarlberg & Gen, 2009; Leachman & Mai, 2014), the private contributions raised by these local nonprofit organizations aim to relieve the pain in the system by helping schools pay for critical needs, such as teachers, computers, and classroom supplies (Irons & Vaznis, 2014; Nelson & Gazely, 2014; Yang Su, 2012).

Local education foundations are distinct among the many nonprofit organizations raising money for public schools (Else, n.d.). Unlike parent-teacher organizations that tend to take on state and federal policies, or booster clubs that focus on a single activity, education foundations tend to emerge within a community with a single mission: To raise private money for public schools suffering from funding shortfalls (Else, n.d.; Fernandez, 2014; Public Education Network, 2011). Research on local education foundations has found that these nonprofit organizations are growing in every state, as is their fundraising power. Among the top 15 K-12 nonprofit philanthropies, private donations increased from \$487 million in 2000 to \$844 million in 2010 (Reckhow & Snyder, 2014). Overall, private giving to education causes was \$54.62 billion in 2014, or 15 percent of the \$358.38 billion donated to charities nationally and the second largest category of giving next to religion (Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2015).

Communities and public school systems are also experiencing the changes and phenomenon associated with the coming of age of the Millennials, as adults under age 35 are both entering K12 schools as teachers and as parents (Emeagwali, 2011). These tech savvy young adults not only use social media to connect socially and professionally, but use it more than any

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other generation for news, information, and social action (Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried & Mitchell, 2015).

With these trends in mind, local education foundation leaders are being advised by state and national associations to incorporate social media tools into their communication and fundraising strategies, similar to recommendations emerging throughout the charitable sector (Else, n.d.). However, research on nonprofits and social media tends to examine large, established, or nationally known nonprofit organizations and the most popular platforms, Facebook and Twitter (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Waters, et al, 2009; O’Neil, 2012). Few studies examine community-based nonprofit organizations that depend on largely on volunteers. There is research examining foundations apart from other types of charitable organizations, finding that foundations are lagging behind other types of nonprofits organizations in adopting social media (Foundation Center, 2010). Therefore, there is a need for more research on how local school foundations apply social media tools to support engagement with their unique social cause (Herman & Renz, 2004; Francis & Talansky, 2012). In particular, as many school foundations seek corporate sponsorship, there is little research on how social cause organizations and businesses interact on social media platforms designed for professionals, such as LinkedIn. At the same time, there is a need for more research on this intersection between complex systems, featuring the wicked problem of school financing, the emergence and growth of private fundraising to stave off community pain, and social media (Paarlberg & Gen, 2009; Yang Su, 2012; Francis & Talansky, 2012).

Nonprofit school foundation or other community-based organizations may benefit from considering the experiences of similar organizations with social media. A case study approach offers the opportunity to take an in-depth look at a social or organizational phenomenon while keeping context in mind.

Purpose

With these trends and phenomena in mind, the purpose of this case study is to add to the developing research by looking more closely at this question: How do two nonprofit education foundations use social media to support engagement with their social cause: Local K12 public schools? This paper will explore the experiences of the two foundations, address implications, and raise questions for future research.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review will examine the broader research related to themes that emerged within these case study examples: The phenomenon of social media, organizational capacity, and the changing concepts related to *engagement*.

Social media

By the end of 2016, more than 2.3 billion people around the world were using social media platforms (Kemp, 2017). The world’s largest social media channel is Facebook, which tabulated 1.23 billion daily users (Facebook, 2017). In the United States, 71 percent of online adults – and 58 percent of all adults – use Facebook as their primary social media platform (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, et al, 2015, p. 3-4). If predictions and current trends hold, by 2020, members of Generation Y, born between 1980 and 2000 and dubbed “digital natives” or “Millennials,” will “continue to be ambient broadcasters” who will “lead society into a new world of personal disclosure and information-sharing” as they carry forward their use of social media and new media technologies even as they age, move into professions, have families, and beyond (Anderson & Rainie, 2010).

Research on how Millennials use social media show that this generation of young adults use social media for news, information, civic engagement, and for supporting social causes in ways that are new, different, and influential (Swindoll, 2015; Georgetown University &

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Waggener Edstrom, 2012; HJC, Care2, & NTEN, 2013; M+R & NTEN, 2015). Studies on how social media impacts charitable giving is finding that donors are inspired as much or more by people in their network who might be connected to a social cause than by the nonprofit organization or the cause itself (Saxton & Wang, 2014).

The #ALSIceBucketChallenge is a dramatic and compelling example of the power of activating social networks for social causes. Through peer-to-peer challenges on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram that reached all the way to the White House, people recorded themselves dumping buckets of ice water on their heads and then donated money to the ALS Association. This fundraising appeal to support research on Lou Gehrig's disease garnered \$100 million in 30 days, a 3,500% increase over the \$2.8 million the nonprofit organization had raised the year prior (Diamond, 2014).

As social media has grown in use and reach, so have the industry blogs and articles advising nonprofit organizations on how to adopt and use social media platforms to support their communication and fundraising strategies (Kanter & Fine, 2010; Kanter, 2009). The discussions of and research on social media use for social causes is expanding across disciplines from public relations, computer-mediated communications, digital media and society, nonprofit management, public affairs, and many others.

Social media platforms differ from other communication tools in that they are interactive and multi-directional. While the organization can produce and post content to a social medium, other people can comment, share, repost, tag, or copy the content (Guo & Saxton, 2014). As researchers study how charitable organizations use social media, they are finding differences between nonprofits that have adopted conversational and decentralized social media elements within their organizations, and nonprofits that are using social media as one-way, broadcast communication channels (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Waters et al, 2009; Kanter & Fine, 2010). More research is needed to understand how social media is reshaping philanthropy and charitable organizations, from how they work internally to how they network externally (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012).

Organizational capacity

Most nonprofit organizations have websites, and the percentage that are establishing Facebook, Twitter, and other social media accounts are rising. With this increased digital presence, "every company, agency, club, university, non-profit organization, and 13-year-old kid hoping to break out as the next Katy Perry is pumping out content" (Shaefer, 2012).

However, research on nonprofit organizations and social media often cite lack of *organizational capacity* as the reason for not being able to incorporate digital communication tools within fundraising and relationship-building strategies (Mitleton-Kelley, 2003, p. 27; Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 13; Clay, Hughes, Seely, & Thayer, 1985; Hauser, 2003; Eisner, et al. 2009; Sharma, 2014; Waters, 2007; Waters et al., 2009; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012). The risk for organizations that spend time and energy ineffectively on social media is that potential stakeholders will overlook infrequent or announcement posts, or worse, consider the nonprofit irrelevant (Strother, Ulijn, & Fazal, 2012; Carboni & Maxwell, 2015).

The term *organizational capacity* has been used broadly in nonprofit research literature. Some studies define *capacity* as "the organization's potential to accomplish its mission" based on multi-dimensional organizational attributes (Eisinger, 2002). Others position *capacity* as a function of *organizational capital*, referring to employees, volunteers, money, networks, infrastructure, governance (Hou, Moynihan, & Ingraham, 2003). The *capacity* of an organization is also affected by external and internal pressures, ranging from the demographic, economic, and political characteristics of a community to competing pressures between stakeholders, resources, and organizational mission (Sawhill & Williamson, 2001; Sowa, Seldon, & Sandfort, 2004).

The capacity challenges are important to consider, but many nonprofit organizations are structured and operate within frameworks that are contrary to the relational, grassroots nature of

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social media (Kanter & Fine, 2010). These structures include replacing volunteers with paid staff; replacing personal relationships with direct mail and email appeals; and measuring success based on fundraising rather than social change (Kanter & Fine, 2010; Kanter, 2009). Yet, research on local charitable organizations shows that the most fruitful donor relationships are built through trustworthy connections between stakeholders and with the nonprofit (Ledingham & Brunig, 2000; Ledingham, 2003; Carboni & Maxwell, 2015; Dunn Saratovsky & Feldman, 2013; Fernandez, 2014).

Building relationships takes time, and one of the most frequent capacity restraints cited by nonprofit organizations is that social media practices are time-consuming (Kanter & Fine, 2010). There is a large body of literature (Saxton & Guo, 2011; Schneider, 2003; Hackler & Saxton, 2007; McNutt & Boland, 1999) that finds that larger nonprofit organizations have an advantage when it comes to affording and using technology to advance their work. However, these reports and studies raise questions about whether the organization's *capacity* for social media is a function of resources or attitudes, as research on social media adoption continues to find that while most nonprofit organizations have a Facebook page, the majority of organizations spend less than two hours a week posting or interacting with that page or other social media platforms (Shattuck, 2014).

Because the nature of social media is participatory, some studies emerging within this trans-disciplinary research are raising questions about the implications of social media for the organization that is using it. Social media can "dramatically increase the number of voices" involved in both communicating about or with an organization, as well as in response or in critique of an organization (Guo & Saxton, 2014, p. 75). Many organizational leaders, governance structures, and patterns of operation may not be ready or open to the scrutiny, criticism, and expectations of transparency that accompany this framework (Kanter & Fine, 2010).

Engagement

Research on engagement and nonprofits examines a wide range of external and internal relationships, from engagement with the community, with donors, with members, with constituents, and with beneficiaries, as well as with boards of directors, employees, and volunteers (Huynh, Metzger, & Winefield, 2012; Twersky, Buchanan, & Threlfall, 2013; Bell & Cornelius, 2013; Eisner, Grimm, Maynard, & Washburn, 2009).

The term *engagement* is used, defined, and redefined in broad range of fields, from education, health care, business, philanthropy, marketing, government, and more. Researchers in these many different fields note the changing and expanding nature of *engagement*. Some research focuses on attitude, others on behavior, and others on organizational attachment or commitment (Macey & Schneider, 2008). In other instances, *engagement* is more specifically defined as "the process of building relationships with people and putting those relationships to work to accomplish some goal (Rosenblatt, 2011). As one researcher noted, "engagement has emerged as an important concept" yet lack of agreement leaves organizations vulnerable to the many ways that others are defining the term, because each definition is based on a different focus (Mersey, Malthouse, & Calder, 2015).

Social media platforms primarily define *engagement* based on increasing degrees of interaction between users who create their own communication content and make their social connections visible and public (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The conversations that develop on social media are "public conversations" (Ross, 2008) and follow nonlinear networks of relationships beyond those known to and defined by the nonprofit organization (Kanter & Fine, 2010).

Social media platforms measure *engagement* in multiple ways. For example, Twitter, a micro-blogging social media platform that limits posts to 140 characters or less, defines engagement as "@replies, retweets, and mentions" (Twitter, 2015). Facebook, the largest social media company, defines *engagement* as "likes+comments+shares" (Facebook, 2015). The use of the "+" is intentional; these steps lay the foundation for Facebook's engagement algorithm.

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Adding “likes” plus “comments” plus “shares” “tells an organization how many people are interacting with its page” and measures the “reach” of an organization’s message, story, or appeal outward into “circles of influence” (Facebook, 2015).

While measuring donor *engagement* through donations collected is standard practice, nonprofit organizations that use social media are advised to track *engagement* to assess the effectiveness of their social media strategies (Lamb, 2015; Nonprofit Technology Network, 2012). However, research shows that simply having a social media presence is not enough to prompt engagement between stakeholders and nonprofit organizations (Carboni & Maxwell, 2014).

In light of the social media definition of *engagement*, emerging research on how nonprofit organizations use social media has developed a typology of posts that characterizes the interactive, or dialogical characteristics, of the post (Carboni & Maxwell, 2015; Guo & Saxton, 2015). Research developing in this area looks at different typologies and frameworks to classify and examine the type of communication and the resulting level of *engagement* (Guo & Saxton, 2015).

Within the research on *engagement* and social media, very few scholars are looking at whether or how nonprofit organizations might be using the business and professional social media platform, LinkedIn. In 2014, LinkedIn reported 300 million users worldwide (LinkedIn, 2015). In contrast to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, the business social media company tends to attract older and wealthier members, and is more popular among adults age 45 and older, and among those making more than \$75,000 a year, according to a Pew Research Center survey on social media and American life (Duggan & Smith, 2013).

Like other social media platforms, LinkedIn defines *engagement* based on how many people view, click, or comment on an update, page, or article (LinkedIn, 2015). However, LinkedIn reframes its social networks and the interactive posts that define *engagement* as “professional networking.” (LinkedIn, 2015). The social media platform has targeted nonprofit *engagement* through targeted portal, and has invited organizations to use LinkedIn to “identify potential volunteers, board members, employees, and donors” (<http://www.nonprofits.linkedin.com/>).

Of the few studies that have examined LinkedIn and nonprofits, only one has explored practices that support *engagement* (Calkins, 2013). The researcher concluded that nonprofit organizations should consider adopting LinkedIn as a social media platform in order to *engage* with potential high-value volunteers and donors (Calkins, 2013, p. 4).

METHODS

A case study approach is used when a researcher wants to pursue an in-depth understanding about the complexities of a particular phenomenon by focusing on one or a small number of examples (Yin, 2014, p. 24). In business and organizational behavior research, the case study is a strategy that allows the researcher to focus on one company as a way to examine the “inner workings” of that business or study the behaviors of people and organizations within the complexities of a community context (Aaltio & Heilmann, 2010, p. 67).

The case can also be a program, a responsibility, or whatever “bounded system” is of interest (Stake, 2009). Rather than attempting to land on a library shelf, this case study is designed as real world research. The instrumental cases for this study are local examples of national phenomenon, that is, how nonprofit organizations are using social media. Instrumental cases serve to explore a particular phenomenon in depth (Grandy, 2010). Real world research also serves to report studies in a way that connects with the real people in the real world doing the real work of their organizations, and meets, as a starting point, how they have come to their “present understandings” in the midst of messy, complex issues and problems (Stake, 2009). A case study methodology is useful when “there is a unique or interesting story to be told” (Neale, Thapa, & Boyce, 2006, p. 3).

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I chose to take a closer look at nonprofit education foundations because I am the parent of three students in K12 schools. I am professionally and personally interested in the organizations, systems, and phenomena that affect public education. In that way, I bring a pragmatic approach to the questions raised in this study. A pragmatic researcher “decides what they want to research guided by their personal value systems; that is, they study what they think is important ... in a way that is congruent with their value system” (Robson, 2011, p. 29). I want to understand more about how nonprofit organizations use social media to engage people on behalf of their causes.

Case Study Design

The definition of *engagement* by the largest social media company, Facebook, allows organizations to assess for themselves how they use Facebook and *engagement* level of their posts (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Saxton, Guo, & Brown, 2013; Carboni & Maxwell, 2015). However, how an organization uses social media is also related to the organization’s existing relationships, capacities, and attitudes (Ledingham, 2003; Kanter & Fine, 2010). The working hypothesis for this case study is that the experiences of these two local education foundations with social media will be similar to in larger studies that show many nonprofit organizations use Facebook similarly to traditional media, that is, to broadcast information rather than invite interactivity from other users. Future research could seek to understand whether nonprofit organizations are limited in their capacity to use social media because of their internal structures and attitudes, or whether there are external phenomenon or pressures affecting the community, school, or nonprofit systems within which the organization operates.

Data Collection

To look more closely at how two nonprofit education foundations use social media to support engagement, I collected data from multiple sources. First, I determined how each organization had adopted social media by reviewing each foundations’ website for social media links. I also searched the five largest social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn for official homepages under the name of the education foundation. I manually sampled the number of posts made by each organization between January and August 2015. I collected a second, in-depth sample of Facebook posts between September and October, 2015, to see whether either organization had changed social media practices between the conclusion of the 2014-15 school term and the beginning of the 2015-16 school term. I counted and categorized the posts according to Facebook’s engagement typology: Like, Share, Comment. I also noted the number of “likes” each organization had for its Facebook as that information is displayed and observable.

I collected additional data from federal 990 tax returns; organization annual reports; and other public records. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the executive director and one volunteer board member from each foundation. I met with each person and explained the purpose and the scope of the interview and its relationship to my case study research. I also reviewed the ethical considerations with each person and obtained verbal consent from each interview participant. I used these questions as a guide:

1. What is the purpose of your organization?
2. How does your organization define engagement and create relationships to support its purpose?
3. What social media platforms do you use? Are they useful?
4. How does social media fit into your communication and fundraising strategies to develop systemic engagement? What opportunities and challenges have you experienced?

Data Analysis

With a case study designed specifically to look at the unique experiences within a specific context, it is important for a researcher to demonstrate attention to validity so that others can see how the data were collected and handled, or replicate and test the method and findings. The quality of case study research is connected to several validity and reliability tests, including

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using multiple sources of evidence, using analytical techniques to find patterns, theoretical connections, and the use of case study protocol (Yin, 2014, p. 45).

For these reasons, this case study used easily accessible sources of information, including public records that are stored outside of the nonprofit organization, such as federal 990 tax returns. In addition, because of the public nature of Facebook and the public access to the organizations' Facebook pages, other researchers can search, find, and tabulate the posts on those pages. However, one limitation to perfectly replicating those findings is that the organization can edit or delete past posts and remove them from the record.

I transcribed the interviews with the four foundation directors and volunteers and noted common or similar phrases and key words that related to concepts noted in the research I was reviewing. Three main themes emerged from this basic coding process and I used these to guide my literature review: *social media*, *organizational capacity*, and *engagement* (Table 1).

Table 1. Interview themes, key words & phrases

Theme	Key words & phrases
Social media for social causes	we should be using it, Facebook, storytelling, community, posts
Organizational capacity	staff, volunteers, time, budget, money,
Engagement	donor, community, school, parents

Source: Interview data

An inventory of communication tools revealed that the only social media platform common to each organization was Facebook. The Mercer Island Schools Foundation has a YouTube channel, but the four videos posted dated between 2009 and 2011. In looking at how each organization had used Facebook, there were so few posts that rather than use a social media data analyzer, I could easily tabulate them manually. In taking a closer look at the number and engagement response to posts between September and November, the low frequency allowed me to count and categorize "likes," "comments," and "shares."

Table 2. Facebook postings by month, 2015

District	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Total
Mercer Island	0	3	2	8	2	4	0	0	2	4	25
Lake Washington	3	3	3	12	5	5	0	0	7	5	43

Note: Facebook data collected from observable posts, January-October, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/mercerislandschoolsfoundation/>

Limitations

The limitations and research issues for this pilot study relate to the ongoing debate over whether or not case study methodology is credible (Yin, 2014, p. 218). Some researchers have critiqued case studies for lacking rigor, or having bias, being limited because of sample size, resulting in unreasonably lengthy reports, or being unable to present research findings that are generalizable (Neale, Thapa, & Boyce, 2006, p. 4; Yin, 2014, p. 21). At the same time, the nature of a case study is to look closely at a specific case or set of cases to bring forth a deeper

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understanding of a phenomenon from the experiences within the case and the complexities of the context. Another potential ethical issue and limitation has to do with the public, observable, and therefore, identifiable, nature of Facebook posts connected to organizations and individuals.

CASE REPORT 1: Mercer Island Schools Foundation

Mercer Island Schools Foundation was founded in 1981 by parents and community leaders to create a way to support and improve education through private fundraising. Over the past 34 years, the nonprofit foundation has raised and donated more than \$10.3 million to the public school system. The core reason that parents, businesses, and community members support the foundation continues to be the same in 2015 as it was in 1981: To give students the best opportunities, to give teachers the best supplies and training, and to create the best schools in Washington state, according to the foundation’s executive director.

Mercer Island Schools Foundation is located within a suburban community near with a population of 24,098 people (www.census.gov), and a public school enrollment of 4,256 students. Over the past five years, the foundation has raised between \$1.4 and \$1.6 million a year (Table 2) from more than 2,000 donors, including 115 companies and foundations (<http://www.misf.org/>).

Mercer Island Schools Foundation relies on a combination of personal networking, community advertising, direct mail, and events to generate civic awareness and donor engagement. The nonprofit foundation employs a part-time executive director and three other part-time staff, and has a volunteer board of directors. When it comes to creating relationships with businesses and individual donors, the foundation relies on the goodwill of volunteers. One strategy is leveraged through connected board members and other supporters who have personal conversations or send emails to potential large donors. Another strategy to building relationships happens through events, such as a community phone-a-thon in November, and a community and business leaders breakfast in April.

For that reason, the executive director observed that the concept of engagement takes on different meanings, depending on how it is used. To engage with large donors, the director said, the foundation needs to show how much that person’s gift meets a need. At the same time, the director said the foundation wants to create community engagement, defined as interest and action, in public education. However, the director noted that engagement in terms of social media refers to the interactivity, the back-and-forth conversation, and the sharing of posts, but not necessarily donations.

Social media fits within the foundation’s strategy to communicate and create relationships with people who live in the island community, the executive director said. “Storytelling is such a big piece of that and social media is a good way to do it,” the executive director said.

The director and a board volunteer said that the foundation and its board want to use social media and its website more effectively, but find that there are many barriers, such as technological support, but finding capacity in terms of time and people is the biggest issue. “If we had Twitter and a better presence on Facebook, we could make inroads into this tech community,” the director said. “But if you are going to do it, you need to have someone dedicated to it. It is an interactive tool with your community.”

A simple counting of posts on the foundation’s Facebook page shows that the organization is using the platform infrequently, posting 2.5 times a month between January and October (Table 3).

Table 3. Facebook postings by month, 2015

District	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Total
Mercer Island	0	3	2	8	2	4	0	0	2	4	25

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Note: Facebook data collected from observable posts, January-October, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/mercerislandschoolsfoundation/>

Mercer Island Schools Foundation's Facebook page had 471 "likes" as of November 1, 2015. In a snapshot analysis of engagement looking specifically at posts in September and October, the foundation had made 6 posts and garnered 11 "likes". The most effective post (5 "likes") was a call to action for volunteers to participate in the phone-a-thon. However, according to Facebook's formula for calculating engagement, Likes + Comments + Shares / Total Page Likes, the posts captured the engagement of about 1 percent of people who have "liked" the organization (Table 4).

Table 4. Facebook data and engagement, 2015

Mercer Island Schools Foundation		
Facebook Posts	September	October
Total	2	4
Likes	5	6
Comments	0	0
Shares	0	0
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Facebook Engagement	5	6
FB Engagement/Total likes (471)	1%	1%

Note: Facebook data collected from observable posts, September-October, 2015. Engagement rate calculated as Likes + Comments + Shares / Total Likes. Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/mercerislandschoolsfoundation/>

"I see social media as one of our biggest opportunities to engage with the community," the volunteer board member said. Yet, both identified personal and business relationship networks as the core systems for engagement and financial success. Large donors are not engaged through social media, but through long-term, in-person relationships that develop behind the scenes. "Our biggest donors do not care about recognition events or being taken out for a glass of wine," the executive director said. "Usually someone who know them calls them or sends them an email, and they give."

CASE REPORT 2: Lake Washington Schools Foundation

The Lake Washington Schools Foundation supports the state's fourth largest school district that has more than 27,830 students in 53 schools across four communities (www.k12.wa.gov). Established in 2005, the nonprofit foundation raises money to support school programs and recruits volunteers for a mentoring program. Over the past 10 years, the foundation has raised and donated more than \$2 million to the school district. Over the past five years, the nonprofit organization raised on average, \$404,651 a year (Table 2). Corporate donations account for more than half of the foundation's income, according to annual reports (<http://www.lwsf.org/>).

When it comes to creating community engagement, which the former executive director defined as an "awareness of the foundation and its mission to improve education for all students", the nonprofit organization uses a strategy of direct mail, events, and relationships with major and corporate donors. In addition, the foundation spends time on keeping up its relationship with the

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school superintendent and the 53 parent-teacher associations that are affiliated with each school building.

The former executive director said the foundation faces many barriers to engagement on all levels. The barriers the director identified were the size of the school district; employing a part-time executive director; relying on key board volunteers for much of the daily work; and few resources for communication and staff support.

“We want to do social media and we know we should do more of it,” the former executive director said. “But we just do not have the capacity.” Not having capacity, the director said, means not having the time to spend on posting.

A simple count of the Lake Washington School Foundation’s observable Facebook posts between January and October 2015 yielded a total of 43 posts, an average of 4.3 posts per month (Table 5).

Table 5. Facebook postings by month, 2015

District	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Total
Lake Washington	3	3	3	12	5	5	0	0	7	5	43

Note: Facebook data collected from observable posts, January-October, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/lakewashingtonschoolsfoundation/>

An analysis of how the nonprofit used Facebook in September and October showed an increase in both posting and engagement, with an average of 6 posts per month. Applying Facebook’s engagement metric showed that the rate of engagement rose with the number and type of interactions (Table 6).

**Table 6. Facebook data and engagement, 2015
Lake Washington Schools Foundation**

Facebook Posts	September	October
Total	7	5
Likes	63	35
Comments	3	0
Shares	1	2
Facebook Engagement	67	37
FB Engagement/Total likes (538)	12%	6%

Note: Facebook data collected from observable posts, September-October, 2015. Engagement rate calculated as Likes + Comments + Shares / Total Likes. Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/lakewashingtonschoolsfoundation/>

The difference is interesting. In this case, the organization posted only twice more in September than October. However, the amount of engagement was double in September than in October, according to the Facebook formula for understanding *engagement*. The posts with the most interactivity featured a short story with a photo, usually of children, garnering “likes” and “shares.”

Even though the nonprofit has seen how social media success works, “we just have so much to do and so few people and resources to do it with,” the former executive director said.

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“We have fantastic volunteers, but our capacity is so limited and social media uses up so much time.”

The board volunteer commented that the foundation works hard to develop relationships with companies in the region, such as Microsoft, Boeing, Waste Management, Google, and more. These major donors look for impact and accountability, not posts on Facebook. The amount of money received by these major corporations account for a large portion of the funds raised each year, the volunteer said.

“Maybe social media would help us engage with parents more,” the board volunteer said. “But they are engaged first, and by that, I mean their first donation dollars, go to the PTA at their school. They see that organization, they are in that organization, and they know that their child will benefit. We are trying to raise money for a school district with tens of thousands of students spread out over four communities and parts of a fifth and sixth. People are connected to their local school. I do not see how social media will help us very much. It helps, I guess, to get our story out there.”

Discussion

This study takes a closer look at two instrumental cases that illustrate broader themes rising from other studies on nonprofit organizations and social media use. These case studies support the working hypothesis that the experiences here would be consistent with other research on whether, and how, nonprofit organizations use social media.

Overall, the findings reflect a profile in social media use typical of nonprofit organizations, with the organization’s resources and strategies dedicated to building face-to-face donor and community engagement and social media used as an informational tool or additional communication channel to push messages. These strategies also reflect the learning curve that nonprofit organizations face in recognizing when and how social media efforts are effective. For example, one foundation had established a YouTube channel six years ago and had experienced *engagement* measuring over 1,000 views, but was not currently being used. Both organizations have been tagged on Twitter by other people and companies, but neither foundation had set up an organizational Twitter account.

The leaders identified organizational capacity, especially related to time, as the primary reason for not fully incorporating social media into their communication and relationships strategies. The leaders of these nonprofits do not measure social media data or compare it to other communication and engagement data in their organizations, even though organizations that use Facebook can view the engagement rates associated with their pages or posts through Facebook’s own tools (Facebook, 2015).

Themes that emerged from the interviews with nonprofit leaders included a desire to use social media; barriers to using social media related to organizational capacity, and an awareness that social media is viewed within the nonprofit sector as an important phenomenon and that using it has been deemed necessary for engaging with Millennial generation parents.

Even as the leaders of these organizations expressed a desire for social media to result in more donations, neither organization had developed communication and fundraising strategies that incorporated social media. In that regard, these nonprofits seem stuck between wanting to use social media more and not having the organizational capacity for using it.

Implications

Research on nonprofit organizations has focused on *stakeholder, civic, and donor engagement* and the methods or strategies necessary to motivate or capture external actions, votes, or money on behalf of an organization and the institution or social cause it promotes (Swanson, 2013). Social media researchers have examined whether and to some degree, how, nonprofits are using social media within their communication strategies, particularly Facebook

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and Twitter (Duggan et al, 2015; Carboni & Maxwell, 2015; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Georgetown University & Waggener Edstrom, 2012; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Lovejoy Waters & Saxton, 2012; Nah & Saxton, 2013; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Waters et al, 2009; Waters, 2007). Social media platforms have been able engage and mobilize people around the on behalf of social causes, a power that outperforms any single organization's address book (Sharma, 2015; Pyser, 2014; Crutchfield & McLeod, 2012). Other studies point to the importance of Facebook and other social media platforms as necessary tools for nonprofit organizations based on surveys that show young adults not only prefer to donate online, but that they view social media as a main source of information about charities and social causes (Achieve & JGA, 2011; M+R & NTEN, 2015).

As these foundations and other nonprofits consider which social media platforms to use and with those choices, how to use them, organization leaders should be aware of how they use social media determines how they engage with the people on that social network. Social media research is showing that social networks reward interactive posts with higher degrees of attention and engagement. The implication for nonprofits that post primarily one-way announcements or post infrequently is that they will likely be overlooked by potential supporters and donors on the social network.

One question for the leaders of these and similar organizations goes to value. Does the social network the organization is using seem valuable? When nonprofit organizations measure social media success in terms of donations rather than conversations, they may struggle with valuing time spent on social media (Kanter & Fine, 2010).

One recommendation for nonprofit organizations that rarely use social media is to first consider what other platforms might be more valuable. Changing the question from "how do we get people to connect with us?" to "who can we connect with out there?" might invite an organization to first look at the larger networks and systems in which it works before jumping into social media (Kanter & Fine, 2010, p. 38). With these larger "ecosystems" in mind, a nonprofit organization might make different choices about which social media platforms to use.

For example, both the local education foundations in this case study rely significantly on business leaders as board members and corporate donors of their fundraising. Yet, neither of these foundations are using LinkedIn, a social media platform designed for business-to-business marketing, communication, and creating connections between professionals (<http://www.linkedin.com>).

Social media communication best serves existing relationships (Kanter & Fine, 2010). These local education foundations spend considerable resources producing and sending direct mail, email, and newsletters into the school and parent community, but get the majority of their donations from corporations. In this context, these two education foundations might be advised to participate in the social media platform designed to connect business leaders, companies, and nonprofit organizations. Having a presence in the same network as the foundation's board members and major donors allows them to promote their work with foundation to others in their networks.

In addition, many professionals use LinkedIn to advertise for or to find volunteer positions and pro bono work, which may offer more benefits to nonprofit organizations (Witzig, Spencer, & Galvin, 2012). Participating in LinkedIn may also take time, but the organization might see more value in time spent expanding its trusted business and professional network than posting on Facebook.

Future research should look more closely at how nonprofit organizations engage with business leaders and corporations for social causes on LinkedIn. Related lines of inquiry could explore questions about influence and impact of businesses on social causes, from donations to volunteer leadership.

Other implications

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The local education foundations in this case study are trying to engage donors in their unique social cause of mitigating the loss of government funding for public schools in their communities. Future research on how education foundations use social media could explore several paths. One, suggested previously, could examine how nonprofits might be using LinkedIn, the business social media platform, to engage donors.

Another strand might compare a nonprofit's engagement rate on Facebook and LinkedIn and examine the differences, if any. Another might consider whether a nonprofit's difficulties in creating social media engagement and responses pointed to larger issues involving the organization's social system.

For example, of the local education foundations examined in this case study, one is dramatically more successful than the other at raising money. There could be many reasons for this, but one line of questioning could ask whether poor social media engagement might be a sign of local social network overload?

When it comes to local fundraising and local efforts to energize social networks, how much is too much? As the number of nonprofit fundraising organizations increases, does a community develop "giving fatigue?" Understanding more about the number and type of other nonprofit organizations fundraising within the same school community might have considerable implications for the work of local education foundations that stand third, fourth, or fifth in line seeking relationships with the same set of donors. How would such a system impact how a nonprofit organization uses social media?

Complexity thinking would suggest that if local education foundations are focused on social media to connect with parents, they may be at a disadvantage. If the phenomenon of short-range, or neighbor-to-neighbor communication, seen within complex systems (Davis & Sumara, 2006) holds true, then potential parent donors are connected in parent-to-parent and parent-to-teacher relationships at their local schools first. The nested system of nonprofit organizations would move from organizations supporting single activities, classrooms, and schools outward to the foundation that operates to support all schools in the district.

In this case study, the Lake Washington Schools Foundation supports a school district that spans six communities. The foundation works to raise and distribute money on behalf of students in 53 schools, each with its own set of parent-teacher organizations, booster clubs, and student body fundraisers. For this organization, it might be useful to look at how much money is raised by other nonprofit organizations and compare it to the \$200,000 to \$600,000 raised annually by the foundation.

This line of research could be explored along the systems paradigm described by Meadows (2008, p. 127) as "success to the successful" or "competitive exclusion principle." The principle says that of two species competing for the same resource, one will be and continue to be more successful than the other, eventually taking a larger and larger share. There are signs that this phenomenon is happening within this very large school district. For example, in one Lake Washington high school, the student body fundraising organization, the football and baseball booster clubs, and the parent-teacher organization raised more than \$700,000 for that school of 1,600 students. This amount is more than the local education foundation has raised in any single year in the past five years. The district has six high schools, so private fundraising among high school parents alone could reach more than \$3.5 million a year.

In this minimal analysis, the foundation appears to be working to create parent relationships within a system that is saturated with nonprofit organizations raising money among parents for students within each school with great success. Within the systems paradigm that Meadows (2008) terms "success to the successful" (p. 126), the foundation, as the organization furthest away from the local relationship, might reconsider the resources spent trying to engage parents and redirect its communication and networking efforts to another set of stakeholders.

These nonprofit organizations may find more success with social media tools if they engaged in mapping their relationship networks, as well as mapping the community ecology of

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educational fundraising groups to understand the extent of connections, conflicts, and overlap. Taking a systemic view of educational funding, need, and demands within a school district could help local education foundation with its social media choices and expectations.

Conclusion

The education foundations in this case study detail experiences with social media that are consistent with prevailing research. That is, the foundations here, like most nonprofits, have created Facebook pages. However, consistent with existing research, the nonprofit leaders here report that their organizations do not have the capacity to keep up with the frequency and interactivity expected on that platform, even though they understand that social media adoption is highly recommended by nonprofit and philanthropy industry experts because of its widespread use and popularity among the large and impactful Millennial generation.

What does that mean for these and other nonprofits? Or, more bluntly, so what?

If organizations are being urged to adopt social media tools to support their existing relationships and extend their reach, then how nonprofit is using or not using social media raises some very interesting questions about nature of relationships between individuals and organizations.

First, as a wide variety of scholars examine how nonprofit organizations use social media to connect with stakeholders, engage donors, and promote their social causes, very few studies have looked at how nonprofits might best target their social media strategies based on real-life networks. This case study could be expanded to include an analysis of social media platforms used by the corporate donors and business leaders that support these nonprofits. If, as other studies suggest, these stakeholders are active on the business social media platform, LinkedIn, then a related study could investigate what kind of posts garner the most engagement on LinkedIn, since there is a gap in the research on nonprofits and LinkedIn.

Second, social media platforms are tools that organizations can use to support existing, real-life relationships, and expand their reach through those relationships to other potential supporters. From this perspective, nonprofits that struggle with creating engagement via social media begs questions about the real-life relationships at the center. How healthy are the nonprofit's various internal relationships? How do leaders, board members, staff, and volunteers interact and function? Is there conflict or rapid turnover? How do people become in relationship with the nonprofit, whether board member, volunteer, or supporter? Which relationships have the most value, and who are they with? Why? How are these relationships created and maintained?

What are the characteristics of the successful relationships, the ones that result in donations and referrals to other donors? How do people most effectively communicate within the real-life relationships between organizational leaders, board members, volunteers, and stakeholders, such as donors and beneficiaries? Have changes in organizational leadership affected existing relationships? Why or why not? Why are people and companies in relationship with the organization? What are the competing on-the-ground relationships? What is the relationship of the social network to the social cause? What is the value of the social cause to the social network?

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, all of these relationships and social media are complicated by the relationships within the system forged by the parent institution, the public school district. Local education foundations are affiliated charitable organizations that exist to support a larger institution that delivers a service. Such affiliated nonprofits support many public and private institutions, from universities to museums to libraries, and more. Within a public school system, the most local experience and the most important relationship happens between a teacher, a child, and a family at a neighborhood school. At the same time, the public school system has multiple other types of relationships within a community, as employer, neighbor, contractor, business leader. Within each of these roles, the school system, like other

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organizations, is creating relationships that may or may not create goodwill within a community. There are many strands to follow here, from organizational culture to leadership to social capital to identity to communication, in addition to the relational complexities that happen within a classroom or building.

These complexities contribute to the reputation of the school within a community and the nature of the relationships between the school system and its stakeholders. As the smaller, support organization, an affiliated foundation is affected by, and has no control over or influence upon, the nature of the school district's varied and complex relationships.

Therefore, the question of how affiliated nonprofits, such as local education foundations, are using or not using social media may open to an examination of the parent institution and its stakeholder relationships. As noted earlier, the *capacity* of an organization is affected by external and internal pressures. If the institution with the most authority and impact, the public school system, is not creating and maintaining good relationships, then the capacity of the affiliated foundation to create beneficial relationships and garner support will be severely limited and will be visible in more ways than a minimal number of "likes" on Facebook.

At a time when public funding for K-12 education continues to decline, research on local education foundations has found that these nonprofit organizations are growing in every state, tapping parents and corporations for private donations to support public schools. (Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2015). Looking at how nonprofits use social media opens into questions about the local nature of relationships between individuals, institutions and organizations, and the factors necessary to create engagement. How an organization uses social media offers another lens through which to examine the complex and systemic nature of these issues.

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