

# CAIS Paper: Disseminating, Assimilating, and Creating: A Social Knowledge Cycle Model for Non-Profit Organizations

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## Abstract

This research paper explores how ‘social knowledge’, as an emergent category of organizational knowledge, flows through non-profit organizations (NPOs). Examining findings from qualitative interviews with 16 individuals from Canadian NPOs on their use of social media for Knowledge Management (KM), the paper builds on KM theories and epistemologies to propose a model for the assimilation, dissemination and creation of ‘social knowledge’ in NPOs.

## Résumé

## 1. Introduction

Much research has been published on Knowledge Management (KM) since the 1990s; the theories produced regarding organizational knowledge (e.g., Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Wiig, 1993) have deeply influenced business practices (e.g., Brown and Duguid, 1998; Prusak, 2001). Although the epistemological impact of social media is now being explored by KM scholars (e.g., Hemsley and Mason, 2013), and by business researchers and professionals (e.g., Grudin, 2006; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Grace, 2009), more research is needed, particularly for non-profit organizations (NPOs). As “people-driven,” “task-oriented” groups (Teegen, 2004) that are “knowledge-intensive” (Renshaw and Krishnaswamy, 2009), KM will play an essential role in NPOs’ practices. However, few studies have explored this issue in depth (e.g., Hurley and Green, 2005; Hume and Hume, 2008; Huck et al., 2011).

Social knowledge refers to “the use of social media to create, transfer, and preserve organizational knowledge – past, present, and future – with a view to achieving the organizational vision” (Girard and Girard, 2011, xxiv). This paper explores the concept of social knowledge in NPOs, informed by findings from exploratory interviews with 16 individuals in Canadian organizations. The result is an emergent model for the dissemination, assimilation and creation of social knowledge in NPOs. The study addresses the conference theme in multiple ways: selected NPOs cross operational boundaries (e.g., legal, hospital, etc.), the researchers collaborating on the project are from Canada and abroad, and it is an interdisciplinary research connecting across multiple domains (e.g., Social Media, KM, and NPOs).

## 2. Literature Review

From a KM perspective, social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) represent features that can benefit the management of organizational knowledge: collaboration, ease of use

(Grace 2009; Schneckenberg 2009), convenience, cost effectiveness and simple implementation (Rodriguez 2010). Social technologies facilitate interactions (Jarrahi and Sawyer, 2013), connection, relationship building, and engagements (Smitko, 2012; Hemsley and Mason, 2013), which are important components of knowledge creation and sharing. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) classify social media by their social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure, providing examples of how specific tools can prove valuable for organizations to engage with individuals and communities. Social networking sites are mentioned, in particular, as being used by organizations for the creation of brand communities, marketing research and as distribution channels (Ibid); each of these examples demonstrate ‘social knowledge’ (Girard and Girard, 2011).

The terms ‘assimilation’ and ‘dissemination’ are drawn from Baskerville and Dulipovici’s (2006) labels for the processes by which knowledge enters (i.e., assimilation) and exits (i.e., dissemination) a system (94). Previous research demonstrates that organizational knowledge, including social knowledge, ‘cycles’ through the organization, entering, exiting, and re-entering, in a continual revolution that generates new tacit and explicit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994; Cook and Brown, 1999; Forcier, et al., 2013).

Wiig (1993) identified three conditions necessary for an organization to exist successfully: 1) products/services and customers; 2) resources, and; 3) “the ability to act intelligently” (cited in Dalkir 2011, 45). However, Wiig’s conditions are not easily applied to NPOs, where “creating social value for the society” is a guiding principle, rather than generating profits (Lettieri et al. 2004, 16). This paper proposes three components necessary for NPOs to assimilate and disseminate knowledge: the *information* that will be converted to knowledge; the *people* capable of gathering and converting the information; and, the *resources*, financial, material and intellectual, that support people’s endeavours.

### **3. Research Design**

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 16 individuals working in small or medium-sized NPOs in Alberta, Canada. The sample included hospitals, health organizations, food banks, shelters, student associations, advocacy groups, legal education centres, cultural foundations, and public libraries. These NPOs were selected using maximum variation criteria (e.g., type, size, budget, communities served, etc.). Each semi-structured interview discussed the organizational practices, perceptions and challenges related to KM and social media with managers and/or staff. Grounded theory analysis of field notes and transcripts identified key emergent themes; these findings have informed the development of a model for social knowledge creation.

### **4. Findings and Discussion**

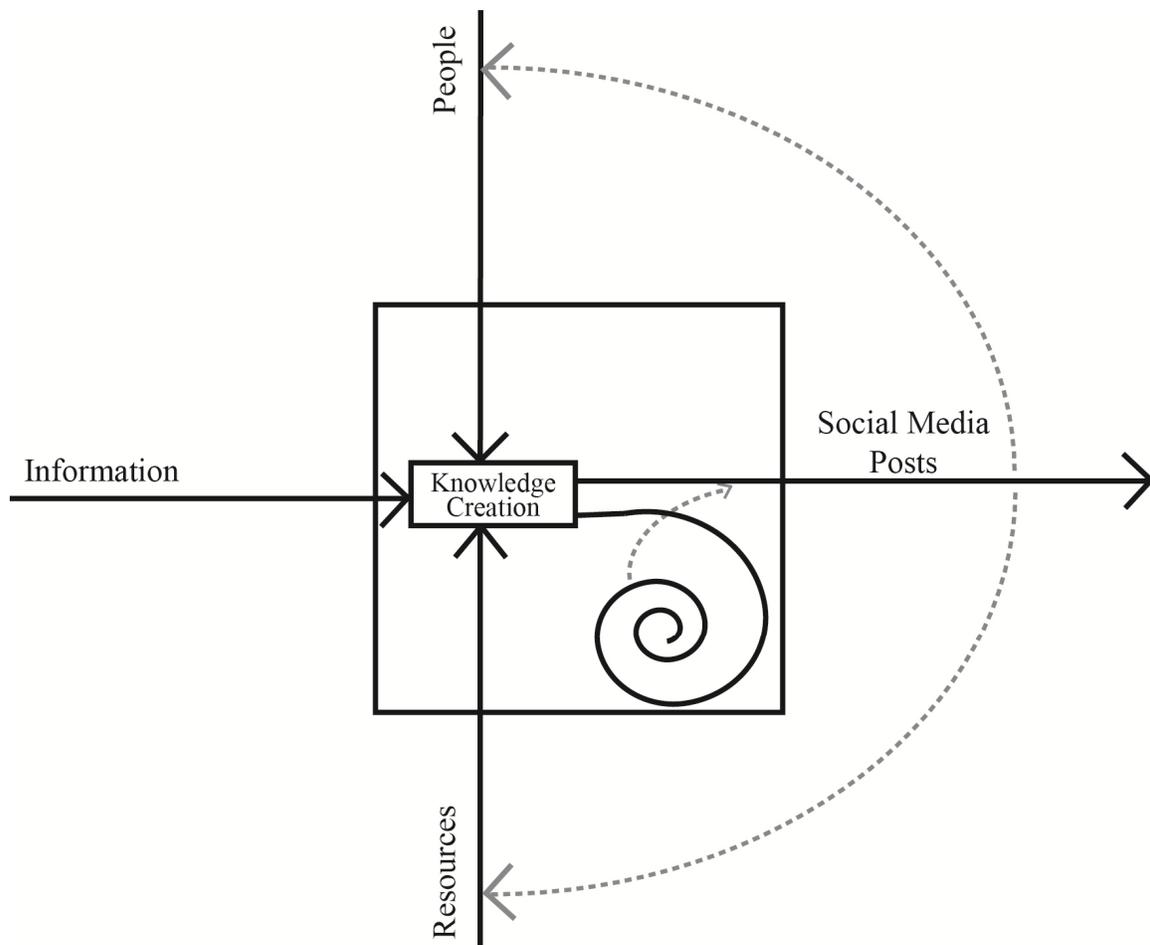
Three components emerged from the data that comprise a model for the assimilation and dissemination of social knowledge in NPOs. The first component is related to *people*. NPOs use social media to connect with people on all levels; this includes members of the public or specific communities for marketing and outreach, (see Given, et al., 2013), as well as volunteers, staff and stakeholders. One participant used LinkedIn and Facebook to share job advertisements and to solicit volunteers, to identify “a number of different groups that were able to just come on short notice and help us” (Jack, social services organization). Indeed, four of the interviewees mentioned using social media to recruit volunteers, while others noted using Facebook to connect and manage volunteers. Social media were also used for

“creating ambassadors” for the organization (Noah, inner-city social services organization). In this way, rather than physically volunteering with the NPO, Facebook and Twitter were used to “bring people to [the] organization by commenting or engaging in the conversation” (Brian, science centre). This strategy allowed people to become involved in the organization’s cause with a minimal time commitment.

A second component in understanding NPOs’ transmission of knowledge is *information*. For the participants, the immediacy of interactions and information shared is one of social media’s greatest affordances. This characteristic is valuable to get “a snapshot of *current* activity or *current* issues or *current* technology” (Richard, public library). Relevant, unstructured data is collected quickly and inexpensively, including “the things that are important to [users] and the things that they’re confused about” (Paula, legal education centre), or “how other organizations like [ours] do their job” (Sam, student advocacy group). Attempts by interviewees to solicit specific information from their communities on social media have proven successful, providing “a better view of what people are really interested in” (Brian) than traditional feedback forms. One interviewee reported getting “different answers and different information, because people are not just filling out a survey” (Jack). Further study must explore the nature of this difference, but Jack’s comment suggests that social media are valuable supplementary sources of new information for NPOs, rather than substitutes for traditional sources. Another affordance of social networks is their two-way communication structure; if an NPO tweets or posts a news story or statistic they are disseminating information related to their work, but they are also inviting reaction on a social platform. NPOs use these replies to create new information, or to attract new volunteers based on the postings. As such, disseminating and assimilating are frequently inseparable notions when using social media.

*Resources*, the final component of the social knowledge cycle, are generated directly through social media and are by-products of an NPO’s presence online. Resources include financial or physical resources (e.g., donated money and/or material goods), as well as intellectual and human resources (e.g., staff and volunteers). Several participants reported running campaigns to raise funds using Facebook or Twitter, for example, “to engage younger donors and supporters” (Jordan, youth shelter) and to “get some support from the community for funding” (Maria, crisis centre). One interviewee noted “if [we] send out a Tweet saying [we’re] in desperate need of coffee mugs, within a few hours [they’ll] have boxes dropped off at the drop-in center” (Arthur, seniors’ centre). Facebook and Twitter accounts are also indispensable for NPOs seeking to gain public support. A sentiment shared by several participants was “If we want to grow, there would be pressure from potential funders to be...present on social media, especially since they’re active on social media” (Leigh, professional association). By bringing together *people*, *information* and *resources* via social media tools, NPOs are able to create as well as assimilate and disseminate knowledge in support of the organization’s goals.

By tracing social knowledge cycling in and out of NPOs, it was possible to theorize the model in Figure 1. This model represents the convergence of three essential components of social knowledge— *people*, *information*, and *resources* — necessary for the creation of organizational knowledge. Some of this knowledge is released immediately, as in the retweeting of a news story; however, some information is retained within the NPO, where it is transferred between volunteers or departments, and generates new knowledge. Once disseminated, social knowledge serves both to inform and educate the community, and to



remind the public of the NPO’s existence, leading to increased volunteerism, support and feedback, all of which allow further knowledge creation to take place.

**Figure 1. The Social Knowledge Cycle Model, demonstrating the movement of social knowledge through NPOs.**

## 5. Conclusion

From a broader KM perspective, there are two important aspects to note about this model. First, social media are not the only tools NPOs use to assimilate and disseminate knowledge. Conferences, workshops, publications, feedback forms and surveys were also mentioned by participants. While the model presented here was developed based on examples specific to social media, it may hold true for KM practices more generally. Moreover, participants considered social media to possess special affordances making them equal or superior to alternative methods. This supports claims among scholars that social media are fundamentally transforming how we understand KM and reshaping the knowledge ecosystem (Hemsley and Mason, 2013).

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