Social Media and Community Knowledge: An Ideal Partnership for Non-Profit Organizations

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ABSTRACT
Non-profit organizations (NPOs) must manage knowledge to be relevant, sustainable and competitive. The published literature suggests that stories can be effective for sharing knowledge and making tacit knowledge explicit; however, researchers have not examined storytelling as a knowledge management practice in NPOs in any depth. Similarly, few studies explore the roles of social media in NPOs, including their usefulness for knowledge management practices. This paper reports the results of a research study that examined how NPOs are using social media, with a particular focus on knowledge management practices. Qualitative interviews with 16 staff members working in a range of NPO environments (such as health, library and social services organizations) were conducted. The findings point to the value of storytelling for sharing the organization’s mission, for monitoring the NPOs reach into the community, and as a mechanism for gathering knowledge from clients and other key stakeholders.

Keywords
Knowledge management, social media, community engagement, non-profit organizations, qualitative research, interviews

INTRODUCTION
The power of social media to engage with user communities is a key benefit for organizations that use these tools. However, the research on social media use for knowledge management (KM) practices – both within and outside of organizations – is in its infancy. KM is concerned with identifying, creating, storing, organizing and disseminating organizational knowledge (Baskerville and Dulipovici 2006). The roots of KM practice are in business, where its early developments focused on large, for-profit organizations (Prusak 2001). KM creates value for an organization (Dalkir 2005) by utilizing organizational know-how and experience to meet goals and objectives efficiently and effectively (i.e., ‘organizational knowledge’). Yet, the potential for social media to shape and influence KM practices is yet to be fully realized.

This is particularly true in non-profit organizations (NPOs), which are an understudied sector within the KM literature. These organizations are people-driven and involve task-oriented groups with common interests (Teegen et al. 2004), often representing humanitarian or community-level work. Although many scholars recognize the benefits of adopting KM in small and medium-sized NPOs (e.g., Gregory and Rathi 2008; Lemieux and Dalkir 2006), little research explores users’ knowledge needs to inform the design of KM practices in NPOs. Until now, few studies have explored the impact of social media in these environments, particularly with respect to user/community engagement. This paper presents the results of a grant-funded project designed to explore the use of social media as a KM tool within non-profit organizations. The findings point to the importance of community-generated and community-gathered stories as key information sources in NPOs and to the power of social media to engage with user communities.

KM & SOCIAL MEDIA IN NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS
NPOs are knowledge intensive units (Renshaw and Krishnaswamy 2009) involved in “creating social value for the society” (Lettieri et al. 2004, 16). NPOs do not aim to generate profits; rather, they focus on activities that help and support communities and create social value for society (Lettieri et al. 2004). For example, public libraries do not aim to profit from inviting citizens to become members; instead, they aim to provide service at no (direct) cost to patrons by providing access to information. Similarly, service organizations provide public awareness campaigns on such topics as health and the environment, and must be knowledgeable about the domain they represent (i.e., ‘expert knowledge’). Even though both for-profit organizations (FPOs) and NPOs have different primary end-goals (i.e., economic value vs. social values, respectively), they both operate in a competitive environment (Hume and Hume 2008). This requires NPOs

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(like FPOs) to adopt and adapt strategies and models including those used in the commercial sector, such as KM (Helming et al. 2004, as cited in Hume and Hume 2008). KM facilitates sustainability and also allows organizations to manage challenges (Renshaw and Krishnaswamy 2009). Knowledge is considered an important asset in NPOs (Gilmour and Stancliffe 2004), so these organizations (like FPOs) must find ways to harness the power of KM systems to: ward off challenges and gain a competitive position (Hume and Hume 2008); and, to effectively and efficiently utilize limited resources, such as funds, technology and human resources (e.g., volunteers) (Helming et al. 2004; Lettieri et al. 2004).

There are some published examples of the use and adoption of KM in NPOs, but these focus on large organizations. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, for example, partnered with a management-consulting firm to develop their KM strategy (Kathleen 2005). Similarly, Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) adopted KM practices, including an intranet project and a content management system (Gilmour and Stancliffe 2004; VSO believes that knowledge is the most powerful tool for any organization, so provides opportunities to partners to share knowledge in and outside of its network (http://www.vsointernational.org/what-we-do/international-knowledge-sharing/). Large NPOs may be better equipped and have better access to KM-related resources as than small or medium-sized NPOs, where managing operational constraints (e.g., monetary, staffing) is significant. Hume and Hume (2008) argue that small NPOs have fewer resources to implement large-scale KM systems, such as intranets; however, small NPOs have just as much to gain from KM systems as do FPOs and large NPOs like Green Peace or the Red Cross. Indeed, many scholars have recognized the benefits of adopting KM in small and medium-sized NPOs (e.g., Gregory and Rathi 2008; Lemieux and Dalkir 2006). Capozzi et al. (2003), for example, note that having a KM strategy helped the Annie E. Casey Foundation to “streamline its technology spending and reduced duplication, thereby saving thousands of dollars across the organization” (91).

Information technology (IT) is central to effective KM and has been identified as a key critical success factor by many authors (e.g., Alavi and Leidner 2001; Lee and Hong 2002). Wong (2005) states “it is indisputable that one of the key enablers for implementing KM is IT” (269). However, in small NPOs IT may be limited, not only in terms of infrastructure but also in terms of human resource support, compared to large organizations (Hume and Hume 2008). Also, technology planning may be seen as a luxury and therefore not given due consideration in NPOs, due to resource constraints (Hume and Hume 2008).

Social media (such as blogs and social networking sites) provide new opportunities for small and medium-sized NPOs (in particular), as these technologies are available to these organizations at an extremely low (or no) cost (Razmerita et al. 2009). In addition, social media tools offer additional advantages, such as the open architecture of these tools, allowing users to participate, collaborate and share with each other. There has been much discussion and research on the importance and power of social media, generally. Existing publications examine blogs, wikis, social bookmarking and tagging, social networking, and image and video sharing (e.g., McNutt 2008; O’Reilly 2005), which are identified as tools and technologies that can be used for managing knowledge. KM activities include: capturing, sharing and disseminating information; sharing user-generated content; and, fostering collaboration among employees (see van Zyl 2009; Razmerita et al. 2009; Schneckenberg 2009). In the KM literature there is emerging support for the use of social media, but the focus is on the potential for FPOs. For example, the use of social media tools such as blogs and wikis in KM have been noted in different research papers (Grudin 2006; Martin-Niemi and Greatbanks 2010; van Zyl 2009). Grace (2009), for example, discussed the use of wikis in three diverse organizations: Mapa (a research company); EBay (an auction company); and, Ingenta (a technology provider). The author notes “many organizations, such as IBM, General Electric, Procter & Gamble, Shell and Airbus have abandoned cumbersome KM systems in favour of Web 2.0 applications such as blogs, wikis and other social software applications (64). Similarly, Rodriguez (2010) noted that FPOs like “DaimlerChrysler, Dr. Pepper/7 UP, and Verizon are just a few companies who are implementing internal blogs on a large scale to share information across the entire organization and scattered around the globe” (111).

The features of these tools, such as collaboration, ease of use (Grace 2009; Schneckenberg 2009; Razmerita et al. 2009), convenience, cost effectiveness, simple implementation, and small investment requirements (Rodriguez 2010) make them potential candidates for KM for small and medium-sized NPOs (Huck et al. 2011). Where, previously, KM content was centrally controlled and users were often reluctant to use KM tools (Razmerita et al. 2009), social media are common to many users’ daily lives, so have the potential to alter the landscape of KM. This study explored the various ways that this is already happening within small and medium-sized NPOs; the results point to the value of social media for capturing and sharing the stories of the organization, with interesting implications for future KM practice.

THE POWER OF STORIES FOR KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

According to Denning (2006) “There is no single right way to tell a story” (42). This is because a wide variety of narrative approaches are each suitable to a different business purpose or function: a success story or “springboard story”, for instance, may prove effective in moving people to action, but will be less effective at communicating tacit knowledge that would benefit the learning needs of an organization’s members (Ibid.; Kadembo 2012). Similarly “knowledge-sharing” stories, which focus on the trial-and-error heuristics of professional
practice, may prove less effective at moving people to action, but are essential for educating staff and stakeholders (Denning 2006; Whyte and Classen 2012). In this way, the ‘story’ as a KM strategy represents a way in which organizational knowledge (typically the exclusive domain of KM) and domain-specific ‘expert’ knowledge (e.g., such as environment, health, or other sector of specialized knowledge) can be appropriately collected and shared by an organization. While there may not be a single ‘right way’ to tell stories, the decision to employ narrative techniques to address organizational challenges is always good KM practice: “We are moved by stories more powerfully than we are moved by instructions” (Wilson 2008, as cited in Kadembo 2012, 228).

Stories provide insight into events and address the “cause and effects of those events” (Brown and Duguid 2000). Stories can be easily remembered and understood, providing shared views and supporting learning by hearing from others (Brown and Duguid, 2000; Barker and Gower 2010). Barker and Gower (2010) note that storytelling is “an excellent business tool” that can be used in change management and organizational learning (299). Many authors (e.g., Santoro and Brézillon 2005; Brown and Duguid 2000) suggest that stories are tools used to share information and knowledge. According to Acosta et al. (2004), “storytelling is a natural way to communicate tacit knowledge” (2) and can be used for converting tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge (Nonaka 1994). Although it may be easy to codify explicit knowledge (e.g., from email or memos), codifying implicit or tacit knowledge from people’s minds is more difficult. It is important to include the context and activities related to specific events, but it is challenging to extract contextualized knowledge and make it explicit (Santoro and Brézillon 2005). Storytelling can help because “just as knowledge, stories draw meaning from their contextual information [they are] an appropriate way of telling what happened and, at the same time, can externalize groups’ tacit knowledge” (Santoro and Brézillon 2005). Stories and storytelling are useful for acquisition and distribution of knowledge within organizations (Lukosch et al. 2011).

The narratives of how and/or why things work as they do within a particular context form a vital part of the KM strategy, overall. Exploring the dynamics of story as a tool for learning, motivation, branding and leadership that influence the thinking and values of societies, Kadembo (2012) postulates that storytelling propagates humanity through socialisation and “helps extend the boundaries of understanding” (222). Socialisation plays an essential role in approaches to knowledge sharing in organizations, facilitating the transfer of individual knowledge to group knowledge (Nonaka 1994). In a 2012 study that collected stories from subject matter experts in a large South African organization and analyzed them in order to develop a classification of KM constructs, it was determined that tacit knowledge from individuals, such as subject matter experts, can be elicited and made accessible to all members of the organization using the common language of KM (Whyte and Classen 2012). As Whyte and Classen (2012) indicate, a common language is a pre-requisite to the successful dissemination of stories; digital approaches to storytelling, such as popular online social media, in addition to the principles of KM, could serve as a common language to facilitate the sharing of organizational knowledge through socialisation, and also support other valuable narrative techniques that will move people to action.

Historically, many of these stories were told verbally (e.g., the classic concept of office ‘water-cooler’ conversations). Today, digital media also play important roles in storytelling within and outside of organizational contexts. For Snelson and Sheffield (2009) digital storytelling “is the process of creating a story with digital media such as images, text music and audio narration.” Klamma et al. (2009) indicate that both non-digital and digital stories have the power to draw and hold people’s attention and help them remember stories for a longer period of time through the application of “interesting plots, involved emotions and strong expressiveness of narrations” (623). Alexander (2006) notes that new practices of storytelling will emerge with newer digital tools. For example, podcasting and blogs (Alexander 2006), and specific sites, such as writely.com, wiki.com and flickr.com, etc. (Barak et al. 2009) are useful tools for storytelling. Within the KM context, however, the power of digital storytelling – by employees, as well as client communities – remains to be explored.

RESEARCH DESIGN
This study used a qualitative paradigm to arrive at an understanding of how organizational knowledge is socially constructed among workers and community members in small and medium non-profits. Social constructionism informs this study’s grounded theory approach to examining the attitudes, perceptions and stories of individuals using social media in the non-profit sector. The application of grounded theory, particularly as defined by Kathy Charmaz (2002; Bryant & Charmaz 2010), complements a social constructionist worldview by acknowledging the constructed role of the researcher as well as the social constructions of participants, supplying a built-in reflexivity necessary for the close empirical study of sampled cases. In this way, themes emerging from analysis highlight the common elements among participant stories, contributing to an understanding of knowledge management and social media use in non-profit organizations.

Qualitative, exploratory interviews were conducted with individuals working in fourteen small or medium-sized NPOs near Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Gumulka et al. (2006) define "small and medium-sized organizations" as community organizations (i.e., registered charities, nonprofit/voluntary organizations, social or community enterprises, co-operatives) with fewer than 500 paid staff (74). The study relied on this definition to define the sample.
of organizations. The sample was drawn from a provincial registry of charitable organizations, volunteer directories and other listings of NPOs. Potential participating organizations’ websites were assessed for geographic reach, activity areas and social media presence, with the final sample selected using maximum variation criteria.

Fifteen individual and small-group interviews with managers and staff examined social media in KM practices. Interviews were semi-structured and explored KM practices, social media use, and the challenges and outcomes of social media implementation. Community engagement with clients/stakeholders was also explored. Overall, interviews ranged between 60 and 120 minutes in length and were conducted in late 2012. The sample included hospitals, health organizations, food banks, shelters, student associations, advocacy groups, legal education centers, cultural foundations, and public libraries. Figure 1 provides an overview of the type and number of organizations represented in the final sample for the study, as derived from the Canada Revenue Agency’s listings of registered charities. The size of organizations ranged from 1 FTE paid staff member to ~425 FTE, and from an estimated annual budget of $95,000 to $46,000,000 (CDN), although staffing and budget figures are not proportional. While all organizations operated in or near the Edmonton area, the communities they served varied widely, from the local level to provincial (Alberta) and/or cross-Canada levels.

Figure 1: Non-profit organizations interviewed for this study, by type of organization

Data analysis of field notes and transcripts used a grounded theory approach to identify emergent themes and patterns across all organizations. The concept of ‘story-telling’ was identified as a key theme related to the ways that organizations engage with their communities. Excerpts of data related to this theme were extracted and analyzed in depth; figure 2 is one example of the visual representation of data that emerged from the study, which documents the centrality of ‘stories’ as a key concept within the dataset. The results are discussed in the section that follows with pseudonyms used to refer to individual participants.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Participants discussed the range and types of social media tools used by their organizations, for varied purposes. Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Pinterest, Instagram, Google+, YouTube and other tools were mentioned, along with generic platforms (e.g., blogs). Many participants used these tools to tell the stories of the organization and the community served. The NPOs used social media for soliciting feedback from community members, running contests, fundraising, and gathering statistics about users. In addition, social media were often used alongside more traditional media, such as brochures and donation cards.

The sections that follow explore these issues in detail, with a focus on implications for knowledge management practice.

Figure 2: Excerpt of visual representation of the ‘storytelling’ concept as presented in the dataset

Social Media: Tools for Communication & Engagement

Most NPOs were only beginning to realize the full potential of social media for external outreach and internal use. Generally, social media activities form part of a broader knowledge management strategy for NPOs, particularly given the need to track and connect with clients, to raise funds and promote activities, and to educate staff and volunteers about key issues. A number of these same activities are identified in literature on the use of social media in organizations (e.g., McNutt 2008, Razmerita et al. 2009, van Zyl 2009). However, the depth and scope of documented social media use varied. Jack, for example, described a very rich use of social media within his social services organization (which focused on homelessness), including Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Google+, YouTube...
and a blog; for example: “On Tuesday we had our campaign kickoff event, and we set up hashtags for that event and had two giant screens that were streaming live exactly what people were tweeting…just kind of trying to get some excitement for that event on Youtube [where we post] our videos. There, we shared our newest campaign video, and it’s already received over a thousand views. And…we’re using it to touch people a little bit, get them to feel a little bit more, but also to get those donations.” Donna (who worked at an animal shelter), on the other hand, noted that the organization was streamlining social media use to focus on client engagement by limiting to two platforms (i.e., Facebook and YouTube) to supplement paper-based marketing. She notes: “Facebook we use to update people on what’s happening in the shelter. I am trying to mix it up really nicely throughout the day so that it is not all in-your-face marketing…it’s like telling a customer…‘hey do you know what it would be like to have a pet in your life?’ It’s kind of a really uplifting way to say ‘look at what we have and look at what you could have’ instead of completely bombarding them with marketing. [Instead] I am always trying to ask a question and leave it open for people to feel like they should comment, because that will open engagement.”

Many of the interviewees also noted the evolutionary nature of social media and discussed how this shaped their approach to creating and using new tools. Although Facebook was widely used and recognized as a tool with broad reach, participants needed to continually monitor tools for take-up by community members and for relevance to the organizations’ daily practices. In most cases, organizations created accounts for various tools to test their usefulness. The affordances provided by the tool, and the time needed to create content, were key factors in prioritizing social media use. Don, a staff member at a children’s hospital, noted “I registered a name for us on Pinterest; we don’t really use Pinterest very much. We do have a corporate profile on LinkedIn but I find that LinkedIn is kind of useless. [And] I really feel that Pinterest will not be a part of [our strategy] for much longer.” Existing research on social media use in the organizational context also demonstrates the importance of time management and matching the function of a tool to a given knowledge need as essential criteria in determining the productive application of a knowledge sharing tool (e.g., van Zyl 2009, 912-913; Razmerita et al. 2009, 1033). For NPOs, the time needed to use these tools was a significant factor in the decision to create and maintain social media accounts for sharing knowledge. As Sam (who worked for a student advocacy group) notes, the major challenge is “Producing [appropriate] content. Absolutely producing content. There’s just not enough interesting stuff to do…I wish I could produce something a day [but] I struggle to make a blog post once every three weeks.”

**Social Media & External Communication: a KM Imperative**

Many of the participants discussed using social media as part of a broader communications strategy that made use of multiple platforms. Just as organizations employ different methods for storytelling to suit a given purpose (Denning 2006, 42), the use of different social media platforms will also lend themselves to specific business purposes or functions. In some cases, key messages were pulled from other documents (e.g., an annual report posted to the NPO’s website) and shared on Twitter. As Jack noted, “brochures, our annual reports, all that sort of stuff goes up on our website, but those key messages… we try and filter it through and send it out into our Twitter, as well.” Donna mentioned having a purposeful strategy of duplication to link various media channels together through a single, shared story. She notes: “if we release a story on social media…we will have the same story on different media…We will put it in a newsletter or we will go as a donation campaign. We share pictures of [a dog named] Scrappy on Facebook saying ‘he had a hard life and…now look at how much better he looks. We did this for him.’ Then you have a whole campaign with him on an envelope going to solicit monthly donations. So, there is definitely duplication.”

In other cases, original content was created for each different platform to suit the audience and the usefulness of that tool. Ray (whose organization provided training and support for people with disabilities) mentioned using social media to share information that “the general public is not necessarily privy to or hasn’t had the opportunity to see yet…on a day-to-day basis. Just to give them an idea of what we actually do here and who we’re actually helping.” Noah (who provided social services to the homeless) noted that his organization also tried to share the inside stories of “who we are and what we do” via social media, in part, as a way to connect with a younger audience. He noted that people who are “40+ they know who we are… those who are 15-40 know the name, but they don’t know us intimately [so we share] updates on how we’re growing… updates on success stories, new success stories, ways to get involved.” Noah also noted that while “newsletters have their place in the world… it’s also a dying place because people don’t always read their mail. You know they don’t always read e-mails either so we’ve sort of chosen [to] not spend as much time focusing on those aspects but saying, if people want to know about us, they will search us out, we will tell them that we’re here [through social media] and funnel people to our website through other marketing and communication strategies.” At the same time, the importance of matching a media channel to the user’s needs is vital; as Arthur (who worked at a seniors’ center) noted, “we deal with a lot of church groups and they’re little old ladies and gentlemen that…don’t have access to computers, or they don’t have the time. That…hurts us…But I want to build relationships with younger people, the people that are hip and happening…and getting them involved in different things we do, because out of the junior high we got yesterday, we have 30 students, we had 10 add us on Facebook yesterday alone right? That’s the future and then
Social vs. Traditional Media: Striking the Right Balance
Participants also referenced the power of the Internet and social media tools for storytelling in discussing strategies for external communication. In some cases, these tools were used as formal, highly controlled mechanisms of information dissemination. Richard, for example, (who worked at a public library) noted that on his organization’s home page there was a section “controlled by marketing, the cover story, and they can have two or three or four or five rotating stories. So that’s kind of official… well, that’s one-hundred-percent official [information shared with the community].” Elsewhere, staff or others could share additional stories, given the layering of official and unofficial channels within the single Internet space. As Richard noted, the buy-in for staff in the organization was tremendous, as people felt comfortable “sharing good news stories” when and how they preferred. The notion of ‘buy-in’ in the implementation of social media, as it arose in interviews, is noteworthy since it speaks to both the question of engagement in the context of storytelling—what Denning (2006) refers to as “springboard stories”—and a reliance on co-creation of content. van Zyl (2009) indicates that staff and stakeholders are more likely to become emotionally committed and share information within an online community if they anticipate receiving help and information in return (912). This level of informal online exchange proved important for some organizations in engaging the public to hear about and share client stories. In certain cases, stories that might originate from unofficial channels are disseminated to the public more officially for marketing purposes. Jack mentioned that the organization shares a number of marketing materials on social media; for example, if they create a video for marketing purposes they will “record somebody telling their story, and then we will share that on Youtube [as part of our] Speakers’ Series [such as] “I never thought I would be homeless,” where someone’s talking about the story about what happened to them, and we try and share that on Youtube.”

Leigh (who worked for a professional association) described a similar, though more formal strategy, for gathering and sharing the organization’s success stories – i.e., the creation of a “Caregiver Ambassador” YouTube video project to “give authorization to people who are already active to speak on your behalf”. She notes that the goal of the project is to “teach caregivers to tell their stories in a way that promotes awareness, and then they also can tell it to their families for their own personal benefit.” As part of a long-term strategy, the vision for the program is that “one or two years from now, we will have people [doing] caregiver blogs, and we've got video blogs, and we'll have all of those things, because caregivers will learn how to tell their story, and we'll have people who want to tell their story, and we'll find a way to convert that and put that online.”

The power of these stories – and the consequences of not sharing them, for NPOs, was highlighted by Noah. He noted that the organization had changed its “website from just a sort of bunch of static pages to a blog and the purpose of changing it to a blog was to tell the story…whether it’s of clients, whether it’s policy, whether it’s potential policy, whether it’s issues affecting the demographic in which we support, we want people to know…If we have a success story, we want to tell people about that.” And, the effect of this blog on the organization’s continuing success was already being felt. As Noah noted, online donations had already increased: “We need to make sure our content is new, fresh, exciting, interesting [because] we have 9,000 hits per month…on the blog. That’s pretty significant and…we have an increasing number who hit the ‘donate now’ button who are new donors. So somehow they’re hearing about us…through our other marketing and communicating strategies whether it be through social media or through traditional media, are hearing about us, going to our website, reading [the blog] and then going ‘Whoa, yeah, I’m going to support this.’ Click; donate now, rather than writing a check or forgetting to write a check.”

Using Storytelling to Guide Internal Decision-Making
Participants also spoke about the impact of internal stories on decision-making within the organization. Maria (who worked at a crisis center), for example, noted that in her organization “people here, from stories [shared among colleagues], didn't like using their Microsoft calendars in their Outlook. [Sharing calendars with others] was just too crazy of an idea.” However, over time, as people became comfortable with this tool, the power of those stories to shape and influence individuals’ activities, diminished. She went on to say “now, it's something we do. It's very natural. We all share each other's calendars. We know where each other are.” The value of tacit knowledge, and the need to capture employees’ and volunteers’ stories of their experiences in the organization, was another common theme in the interviews. However, very few interviewees explored the value of social media as internal knowledge management tools. As Leigh noted, capturing knowledge of the organization’s “own history” was a problem, particularly given staff turnover. She stated: “it’s hard for the organization to say, ‘Well, this is where we came from. This is our story.’ I know our boss has to write out a specific thing saying, ‘this is where our programs came from,’” [Laughs] 'cause otherwise that information would be lost, and people will wanna know, eventually. It's like, 'Well, where did you guys come from? What's your story?' It's information about the history that we're doing, information about what we've done in the past, like when you have events or programs or anything like that. If that knowledge isn't kept, you can't replicate that, even though
you're the same organization, and you're trying to do the same project you did last year.”

Capturing this sort of tacit knowledge is of central importance in knowledge management (Nonaka 1994), and as previously indicated, both storytelling (Acosta et al. 2004; Brown and Duguid 2000; Lukosch et al. 2011; Whyte and Classen 2012) and social media (Razmerita et al. 2009; van Zyl 2009) can serve as effective strategies for codifying and sharing that knowledge, particularly when combined. Based on interviews, most NPOs are not yet at a point where social media are being employed consistently as a knowledge management strategy to capture and share the organization’s stories.

In some cases, organizations did have social media systems and strategies in place to facilitate gathering internal knowledge, although these were generally focused on clients’ stories. Noah discussed the use of a client management system as one mechanism for capturing tacit knowledge: “whenever a conversation is had [with a client] then there are case notes which are recorded and can be viewed by the organization right? So they’re private and confidential…but we write it down…because we need to be able to share it [within the organization].” However, other participants noted that their own internal procedures served as roadblocks to effective strategies for documenting client stories. Ray noted that his organization’s website could only be updated by one person, which restricted its usefulness as a platform for gathering stories. Where, previously, the organization “would post the odd story here and there” due to the length of time it would take to update information on the website, social media tools now served as a useful work-around to this problem, allowing clients to “share stories as soon as [they] happen.” Noah remarked that immediate access to this type of information is vital in times of crisis, in particular: “When there is something immediate [social media tools are] preferred; so, in a time of crisis, flood, break in, that type of thing, it’s quick it’s easy. You know traditional media follow us [on social media] and so if there’s something, an interesting enough story then they see it on Twitter and they call us before our press release is out.”

Some participants also mentioned making use of analytics, or “the obvious kind of metrics of clicks and followers and likes” (Richard) to track the success of the organizations’ social media strategies. However, Richard also said that “sometimes we get lazy and don’t track click backs to actually see outcomes of… you put a post up there and somebody retweet, but did anybody actually click it or not?” Strategies for dealing with the variety of analytical tools – including the time needed to track data, knowledge of specific affordances of analytical tools, as well as ideas about how best to use the data to effect change, are some of the key challenges raised by the participants in this study. As Leigh stated “I’ve got how many people like us and how many people retweet us. I don’t have a system yet of keeping track of that, and that’s something I… keep wanting to work on, but it keeps getting put off, creating a system to keep track of what people respond, because ideally we would see ‘people are interested in this,’ and we would post more about that.”

Social Media & Information Gathering for KM

Participants’ views on using social media as sources of information for organizational use were also varied. Some participants spoke of the value of reviewing Facebook postings to learn about community members’ interests. Others used Twitter to monitor news and current events. In some cases, this information had a direct impact on community outreach. Maria mentioned reading media reports on social media about local sports figures’ “public deaths by suicide” and then contacting the teams to offer support services. Donna noted the importance of following up on postings outlining “animal protection issues,” as such activity is central to the organization’s mandate. At the other extreme, this same participant noted the importance of finding and sharing “silly things” about animals (e.g., “a funny video from YouTube”), as a way to keep their audience engaged via social media. Wess (who worked at the local Food Bank) commented on the value of social media for gaining insight into people’s use and support of the organization. She noted that social media “we see how people are supporting us a lot more, whereas maybe before…we would just see random donations coming in and not knowing really what they’re from or that these people have been having their child’s birthday party and getting Food Bank donations for the last five years. It’s not something that we would necessarily know until we see their mom tag it.”

Many participants mentioned the value of social media for keeping up with the activities of other NPOs and to “connect to them more meaningfully” (Jordan, who worked at a youth shelter) by contacting them when event details are posted. Paula (who worked for an organization focused on legal education) also noted that they “gather information about what other groups are doing” via social media to guide their own work; this information may not be “new or different, but more accessible, because previously that’s the kind of knowledge that we would try to tap into through surveys or focus groups or evaluations from presentations.”

Gathering user feedback as part of a “customer service” (Donna) strategy was important for some participants, while others rarely engaged with their audience, perhaps “only when we need the help” (Ray). For Leigh, gathering information via social media was not only useful, but also cost-effective, given that “it’s expensive to gather that information” by other means.

Social Media & Storytelling: KM Through Community Engagement

However, the most valuable resources, according to the participants in this study, were the stories told to them by members of the community. Client ‘success stories,’ in particular, were highlighted as central to the NPOs own continuing success; as NPOs rely heavily on donations,
volunteers and government support, being able to track and share the stories of individuals who have been helped by the organization are key elements of effective management practice. Denning’s (2006) characterization of “springboard stories” that “spark people to action” aligns closely with the client “success stories” that emerged from interviews. Don explained the value of sharing client stories: “There is absolutely no question that patient stories work as a way to motivate people to donate their time or money to the [hospital]. I find that direct appeals to cash or volunteers are effective and are definitely rebroadcast throughout our social networks [but] when I post a photo plus a brief story of a patient who has had an experience with the [hospital], that always is off the charts by comparison. And…the stories are pretty dramatic….like, ‘well this poor kid is 4 and they’ve had 4 heart transplants and…they’re still…thriving’ and so…that really grabs people’s attention and it really makes concrete what the need is for the [hospital] and what it is that we do.” Leigh shared this perspective and also noted value of sharing stories via social media as a way to provide evidence to convince stakeholders of the importance of the organization’s mandate and strategies. She notes: “We want people to be blogging about their experience [because] it’s not a formalized study, but you could potentially use that to say, ‘Lookit, these are real issues. These are what people are dealing with every day. These are – They keep coming up. They came up in our…founding research that we did in 2001. It came up in 2010, and it’s on social media now.’ We could definitely do something like that, where you could use that information.”

However, gathering these types of stories from community stakeholders is a challenge. Although some organizations have knowledge management systems in place to track client stories, which can later be shared (with permission) via social media, others lack these formal strategies. Noah described the organization’s internal client management system as a clearinghouse of potential stories, while Richard noted the lack of any such tools to gather and document “stories/testimonials” about his organization. He notes: “One of the things we talked about in the past and which we don’t do well [is] how do we collect stories? When people tell us a great library story… The new immigrant who comes in and they get comfortable dealing with institutions. They get a card. They start learning English. They fill out a resume and build a resume on one of our computers. They get a job. Life changing stories! We don’t have a great central pool for those [and our marketing division] will say, ‘We need – Any good stories? We’re doing the annual report,’ or… ‘We’re trying to write a proposal,’ or ‘We’re trying to write a grant for funding. We want some great stories.’ Well, people have them, but where are they, right? They’re all over there in seventeen people or five hundred people’s brains.” This organization recognized the importance of gathering these stories/testimonials as a key knowledge management practice; staff had created a tag for “testimonial” to be used on their intranet as a stop-gap measure to identify stories, but a more systematic approach was needed in the long term.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Three key findings emerge from the discussion presented above. First is that using social media for marketing and promotion to reach clients and donors in the community is an essential function of these tools for NPOs. While this function appeared self-evident to most participants, most organizations struggled in finding the most effective way to use these tools for promotion, and moreover, how social media might further benefit the organization internally. Conceptualizing interactions that take place on social media as a way to generate and disseminate stories that engage the public is one way that organizations overcame this challenge. In examples provided by Noah, Ray and Wess, the collaborative and open nature of social media makes it easier to collect tacit knowledge in the form of stories and anecdotes that can then help guide internal decision-making; the challenge, then, as described by Leigh and Richard, becomes how these data should be tracked and recorded systematically. A next step for future research would be to determine if and how stories could be collected, tracked and consulted in NPOs.

A second key finding is the importance of balancing the duplication of information across multiple platforms with unique media strategies. Donna and Jack, for example, both noted that key messages and stories are disseminated across traditional and new media. Having photos of Scrappy the dog on the animal shelter’s Facebook page benefits the mail-out campaign for donations featuring Scrappy on the envelope, and creates a greater level of engagement among the community of donors. As Arthur describes in his own work of “building bridges” by using social media to get younger people involved in his seniors’ organization, it is important to use different strategies to reach the broadest possible audience. Since the success of NPOs relies on how well they maintain engagement with the public, social media represents an important solution in that regard.

A third significant finding of these interviews is the importance of having a formally articulated communications strategy for implementing social media. Organizations that designed an approach and specific direction to their application of social media (e.g., Jack, Leigh, Donna, Noah) remarked on the success of these tools in reaching and engaging their client communities. Organizations in which uses of social media seemed somewhat less well-articulated or more tentative (e.g., Sam, Jordan, Arthur) expressed a greater level of frustration over a diminished return on time spent producing and sharing content using social media. Having a conscious plan in mind that includes the intended audience and the intended message(s) is essential to the success of a social media implementation for the purpose of promotion and external communication.
A categorization of types of knowledge mentioned by participants suggests three distinct classes, with further implications for internal knowledge management, knowledge transfer, and staff training:

- **Procedural knowledge** (knowledge related to policies, procedures and administration);
- **Expert knowledge** (expertise and experience of the knowledge community within which the organization participates);
- **Community-generated knowledge** (the stories that emerge from the community).

A process is suggested by this characterization of knowledge: community-generated knowledge informs the mission and goals of the NPO, which in turn generates procedural and expert knowledge. Expert knowledge is used to produce products, programs or services for (the betterment of) the community, which ultimately drives the community to generate new knowledge valuable to the organization: i.e., ‘success stories.’ It is important to note that this study focuses on the organizational perspective; future research should also examine the use of social media in NPOs from the perspective of the community members and served public.

In examining how social media are used in small and medium-sized NPOs, it is clear that these organizations are still discovering how best to make use of these tools for communication and knowledge management. Interviews revealed that approaches to implementing social media varied based on the number of different tools or platforms used, the amount of time devoted to using them, and the manner in which they were used to gather and share information internally and externally. For instance, while Jack’s social services organization had embedded social media into their official communications and marketing policy, and were intent on gaining exposure through as many social media platforms as possible, organizations such as Donna’s (animal shelter), Don’s (children’s hospital) and Arthur’s (senior’s centre) identified the value of limiting the organization’s time and focus to one or two more popular, proven platforms for promotion (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube). The examples and stories provided by participants can help develop best practices for social media use in NPOs in future research. While this variation among organizations’ implementations can be attributed to the size and scope of each organization and the different communities they served, many of the unique uses identified by participants—particularly in collecting and sharing client ‘success stories’—speak to the versatility of social media for the purpose of knowledge management in the non-profit sector.

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REFERENCES


