

# Social Media Management

## EXPLORING FACEBOOK ENGAGEMENT AMONG HIGH-ASSET FOUNDATIONS

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*Do foundations effectively use social media to engage stakeholders? Do usage and engagement vary by foundation type? This article has been written to stimulate discussion and research about social media use and user engagement by foundations beyond measuring social media presence. We analyzed Facebook usage and stakeholder engagement for three types of foundations: community, corporate, and independent grant-making foundations. We found that although community foundations are more likely to have a social media presence, corporate and independent foundations are more likely to use Facebook and to effectively engage stakeholders. Findings illuminate the need to understand social media usage and engagement in addition to presence. We discuss potential benefits of social media use and provide practical communication management recommendations for nonprofit practitioners.*

**Keywords:** *social media, foundations, stakeholder engagement, Facebook, communications*

**SOCIAL MEDIA USE** by the nonprofit sector has exploded in recent years. Social media (for example, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn) are online platforms that promote dynamic, real-time communication among many actors (Barker et al. 2013; Lovejoy and Saxton 2012). Though there are hundreds of millions of visitors to social media sites each month, research on the use, functions, and purposes of social media as a communication strategy has lagged (Guo and Saxton 2014; Treem and Leonardi 2012). Existing social media scholarship tends to be limited to organizational use of social media rather than stakeholder engagement or interaction with site visitors.

Social media are a potentially useful strategic communications tools that nonprofit organizations can use to reach multiple stakeholders simultaneously in real time without incurring significant costs associated with traditional forms of communications. Recent studies demonstrate that social media are generally useful for creating dialogue, building communities, and disseminating advocacy messages (Bortree and Seltzer 2009; Briones et al. 2011; Greenberg and MacAulay 2009; Guo and Saxton 2014; Lovejoy and Saxton 2012; Waters

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et al. 2009). Used strategically, social media platforms may facilitate increased public support and stakeholder engagement with mission through real-time feedback loops (Reddick and Aikins 2012). Social media may also be characterized as a public good (Mendel and Brudney 2014), providing spaces for nonprofits to steward discourse and create public value.

In this study, we examined social media use and user engagement of public and private high-asset foundations. Philanthropic foundations in the United States are nonprofit organizations whose missions are generally to help ameliorate social problems within communities (Bennett 2014). Communications between organizations and stakeholders are strategic tools used to build and maintain relationships (Ledingham 2003). We expect public foundations to be more invested in reaching out to the community through social media than their private counterparts because they must attract a wide array of supporters to operate. We also expect public foundations to have more stakeholder engagement than their private counterparts. We examine Facebook social media usage and engagement by social media post type and post content to determine how foundations are using social media and what results in the most engagement.

## Facebook as a Strategic Communications Tool

Cultivating stakeholders through a consistent mission-based strategy is vital to organizational effectiveness (Balser and McClusky 2005). Social media platforms can be part of a larger communications strategy to engage stakeholders with the organization. Communications—including choice of communication platform—are strategic tools used to manage relationships with stakeholders (Courtney 2002; Cutlip, Center, and Broom 1994; Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig 1995; Hung 2005; Ledingham 2003; Maxwell and Carboni 2014; Waters 2008). Developing relationships through communication is crucial for building and maintaining relationships with stakeholders and organizational well-being (Dozier et al. 1995; Grunig 1992; Ledingham 2003). Strategic communication is continuous and dynamic, and shared information should be more useful to stakeholders than simple information posting or one-way exchanges (Auger 2010; Taylor, Kent, and White 2001).

When strategically managed, stakeholder communication can foster an environment in which increased stakeholder engagement can help organizations more readily achieve their goals (Dozier et al. 1995; Ledingham 2003; Ledingham and Bruning 1998). Simply posting information online does not necessarily result in stakeholder engagement or achievement of strategic communication goals (Auger 2010). *Maintaining* a Facebook, Twitter, or other social media account does not equate to two-way engagement with stakeholders, though many nonprofits use social media this way (Creedon 2014). To use social media effectively for dialogic communication, organizations must first encourage stakeholder engagement with their social media content (Carboni and Maxwell 2015). We focus on social media use and user engagement for high-asset foundations to better understand whether social media can foster two-way engagement.

For foundations, use of social media to reach and engage stakeholders may be related to organizational needs to attract community support, which vary by foundation type. The Internal Revenue Service classifies foundations into two major types: public and private. Classification depends on whether the foundation receives public support (Fernandez and

Hager 2014; Heydemann and Toepler 2006). Public foundations receive public support from a wide variety of donors, while private foundations tend to rely on investment income or contributions from a single or small number of donors (Grønbjerg 2006; Roelofs 2003). Public foundations typically include community foundations, while private foundations include independent (often family foundations) and corporate foundations.

Recent surveys offer insight into the developing use of social media specific to foundations. These examine the extent to which social media are being used by foundations, but do not shed light on social media effectiveness or differentiate by foundation type (Foundation Center, 2014). The Foundation Center's Glass Pockets project recently produced an insightful report (Foundation Center 2014). The study found that only 45 percent of foundations use social media in any capacity, and generally only for informing the public about work of the foundation (Foundation Center 2014). Most notably, the survey finds that 71 percent of foundations using social media have not developed a formal strategy for social media use. According to the study, of the foundations using social media, 67 percent of foundations reported using social media primarily to promote the work of the foundation. Additionally, a 2010 study by the Foundation Center found that, of those foundations using social media, only 17 percent found social media to be truly beneficial for their organization (Foundation Center 2010), which is not surprising given the lack of strategy in social media communications. In terms of platform choice for foundations, Facebook is employed as a social media tool more than Twitter and blogs (Barker et al. 2013; Brock and Buteau 2012).

We predicted that public and private foundations use social media differently, with public foundations more engaged in social media and private foundations less engaged. Implicit in the public-private distinction is that public foundations will seek greater input and engagement from the public in pursuit of their mission because they are more reliant on the public for funds. Community foundations are required to have broad support from multiple actors, as opposed to private foundations, which may be supported by a single philanthropist or corporation. Community foundations are also required to demonstrate ongoing financial support from a broad base, or risk losing their 501(c)(3) public charity tax status from the US Internal Revenue Service. Conversely, private foundations may be less likely to attempt to engage the public in their efforts because they do not need to fundraise from the general public or get community buy-in for projects (Carman 2001; Eikenberry 2006; Fernandez and Hager 2014; Frumkin and Andre-Clark 1999; Hager and Boris 2013; Hammack 2006; Prewitt 2006). We also predicted that public foundations would be more successful than their private counterparts in engaging social media users. Deploying technological resources can increase the number and kind of partnerships for nonprofit organizations (AbouAssi, Makhoul, and Whelan 2016), which may be of more importance to public foundations seeking community stakeholder engagement than to their private foundation counterparts.

We explored these ideas by examining Facebook posts and user engagement data for three types of high-asset grant-making foundations: community foundations, corporate foundations, and independent foundations. Community foundations are public foundations that seek support from the general public to fund grant-making activity. Corporate foundations are private foundations that receive funds from parent companies but maintain a legally separate status. Independent foundations are private foundations that receive endowments from individuals or families.

## Methodology

We examined Facebook usage for a random sample of one hundred community, corporate, and independent foundations by asset size (all over \$10 million in total assets) for a total of three hundred organizations. Community foundations are public foundations; corporate and independent foundations are private foundations. Lists of high-asset foundations used to generate the random sample were obtained through the Foundation Center. As previously noted, public and private foundations are substantively different in how they are funded and thus may have different incentives to engage with stakeholders in public social media forums. We chose to focus on high-asset organizations to minimize differences among smaller and larger foundations. Larger foundations are more likely to have professional communications staff and communications strategies than smaller foundations. Social media engagement includes transaction costs that are potentially higher for smaller organizations.

We used Facebook data because Facebook is the most commonly used social media platform among nonprofits. Facebook users are a conceptually distinct stakeholder group that engages with the organization in a public forum. Facebook stakeholders are important because they serve as indicators of public involvement in the mission and activities of the foundation. Reliance on the public for funding should influence the potential importance of social media as strategic communication tools. We predicted that community foundations would be more likely to use and be more effective at engaging stakeholders through social media platforms than their private foundation peers because they rely on the public for financial support.

Facebook data were collected over a two-week period in April 2014 using Simply Measured, a commercially available program. Simply Measured is one of many social media analytic programs offered to organizations, government, and businesses to delve deeper into the effectiveness of social media communications. Data included all social media posts and user engagement. Collecting Facebook and other communications data from a distinct time period is a technique consistent with methodological approaches of other media analyses (Carboni and Maxwell 2014; Weare, Loges, and Oztas 2007). It is cost prohibitive to obtain more than two weeks of data using commercially available programs.

Facebook-use data are the total number of Facebook posts by each foundation during the two-week period. User engagement is the total number of likes, shares, and comments each organizational post garners. *Engagement* is an industry term, defined by Facebook and programs designed to produce Facebook social media analytics (Facebook 2015). After an initial search for Facebook pages, our sample was reduced to 106 foundations with active Facebook presences. The sample included seventy-two community foundations, eleven independent foundations, and twenty-three corporate foundations. There were a total of 1,134 posts for all foundations in the sample during the time period studied. Posts were coded in two ways to better understand Facebook user engagement. First, we coded posts according to type of post: link, photo, status, or video. Categories are mutually exclusive. This information was provided by Simply Measured. Second, we coded the content of individual posts in five categories according to what the post shared. The categories are (1) organization information; (2) other information; (3) question; (4) post action; and (5) other action. Coding criteria are found in Table 1.

Categories are not mutually exclusive. Each post was coded by two people and results were cross-checked to ensure consistency among coders.

**Table 1.** Post Content Coding

<i>Post Content Type</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Coding Scheme</i>
Organization information	The post shares information about the organization.	0 = no
		1 = yes
Other information	The post shares information about something other than the organization (e.g., community event, news).	0 = no
		1 = yes
Question	The post asks a question.	0 = no
		1 = yes
Request action with post	The post requests user to interact with post.	0 = no
		1 = yes
Request other action	The post requests user take action other than interacting with post.	0 = no
		1 = yes

## Results and Discussion

Because of the exploratory nature of our study, we provide descriptive data analysis for social media use and user engagement for our sample. Descriptive analysis includes foundations' Facebook presence and usage along with stakeholder engagement. We also examined the average total engagement per post by foundation type. We further break this down by post type and content type. We found mixed support for the idea that public foundations would have a larger Facebook presence. Contrary to expectation, we found that private foundations are more likely to have user engagement than public foundations. We discuss the findings following. Results raise important questions about foundation social media usage.

We predicted that public foundations (community foundations) would have greater social media use than their private counterparts (independent and corporate foundations). Supporting this idea, community foundations were much more likely than independent or corporate foundations to have a Facebook presence, indicating a form of social media use. Though community foundations have the greatest presence and greatest number of posts, the average number of posts per organizations was lower for community foundations than for independent and corporate foundations. Additionally, corporate foundations had the largest range of number of posts; and community foundations had the smallest standard deviations, indicating smaller spread across the range of posts. This is contrary to our idea that public foundations would have a more active presence than private foundations. Table 2 includes descriptive statistics for organizational posts by foundation type.

Breaking posts down by post type and content sheds further light on how foundations use social media. Foundations exhibit similar usage patterns of post type and content. All types of foundations were more likely to share links and photos than other types of posts. Foundations were most likely to share information about something other than their organizations, suggesting that posts are not used to directly enhance branding or share information about the organization with stakeholders. Table 3 provides summary information about post types and content.

We also predicted that community foundations would be more successful at user engagement than their private counterparts. Though organizations exhibited similar post types and con-

**Table 2.** Organizational Posts by Foundation Type

	Total Posts	Average Posts per Organization	SD	Minimum Posts per Organization	Maximum Posts per Organization
<b>Community Foundations</b>	664	14.42	9.89	1	45
<b>Independent Foundations</b>	159	24.66	12.49	1	40
<b>Corporate Foundations</b>	311	33.35	26.19	1	64
<b>All Foundations</b>	1134	21.05	18.32	1	64

**Table 3.** Type of Post by Post Content Type*Community Foundations*

	Information about Organization	Other Information	Question	Post Action	Other Action
Link	171	256	47	11	138
Photo	146	208	21	9	93
Status	34	29	9	2	9
Video	18	32	8	5	11
Total	369	525	85	27	251

*Independent Foundations*

	Information about Organization	Other Information	Question	Post Action	Other Action
Link	46	74	9	0	12
Photo	33	49	12	4	23
Status	11	3	1	0	3
Video	0	10	2	0	0
Total	90	136	24	4	38

*Corporate Foundations*

	Information about Organization	Other Information	Question	Post Action	Other Action
Link	53	102	23	4	30
Photo	76	119	21	0	27
Status	18	26	11	2	9
Video	12	18	1	0	7
Total	159	265	56	6	73

tent, user engagement varied greatly. Community foundations had the lowest average engagement, with an average of 11.82 instances of engagement per post. Independent foundation posts had an average of 155.21 instances of engagement, while corporate foundations had an average of 158.16. These findings are contrary to our prediction. Table 4 provides summary information about user engagement.

**Table 4.** Average Engagement by Post Type and Post Content

<i>Community Foundations</i>					
	<i>Information about Organization</i>	<i>Other Information</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Post Action</i>	<i>Other Action</i>
Link	9.474	8.833	6.723	6.091	7.937
Photo	17.824	16.774	11.429	1.556	16.688
Status	2.912	4.172	6.333	2.000	3.667
Video	15.111	10.813	6.250	9.600	12.909
<i>Independent Foundations</i>					
	<i>Information about Organization</i>	<i>Other Information</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Post Action</i>	<i>Other Action</i>
Link	101.304	94.892	20.222	0.000	204.250
Photo	106.030	247.939	348.583	296.500	66.391
Status	1.273	0.000	1.000	0.000	2.333
Video	0.000	498.000	3.000	0.000	0.000
<i>Corporate Foundations</i>					
	<i>Information about Organization</i>	<i>Other Information</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Post Action</i>	<i>Other Action</i>
Link	46.359	79.569	64.739	2.75	65.500
Photo	170.849	272.962	68.548	0.000	283.407
Status	3.056	7.885	11.273	0.500	4.000
Video	154.083	82.778	17.000	0.000	148.000

As previously mentioned, independent and corporate foundations had significantly more user engagement per post than did community foundations. For all organizations, photo posts led to the most user engagement across types of post content. This indicates photos are most useful for garnering user engagement.

## Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

The limits of this study are noted given the two-week data collection process. Although industry and scholarly studies support a two-week approach, a longitudinal study would be beneficial to future research. Given the excessive cost of obtaining analytics for longer periods of time, we were unable to expand the analyses past two weeks. However, we employed both an engagement analysis as well as coded posts to create a broad and in-depth comprehensive review of the collected data.

Though we found limited support for our hypotheses, data tell a compelling story about Facebook social media usage and user engagement that raises questions for future research. Private foundations are less likely to have a Facebook presence, but those private foundations



with a presence are more likely to post and have user engagement than their public foundation counterparts. Though presence and usage rates vary, all types of foundations tended to use Facebook in the same way when posts are broken down by type and content. Data suggest that private—independent and corporate—foundations are better at eliciting that two-way dialogue important for creating relationships with stakeholders. It is possible that private foundations are better equipped to engage stakeholders. This may be the result of a more cohesive communications management strategy to promote their organization and engage social media users. More research is necessary to better understand these findings.

Additionally, findings suggest that foundations may pursue a relationship with stakeholders irrespective of their funding needs. Private foundations that rely on single or few sources of funding are more likely to use social media and engage users than are public foundations who rely on the community to support operations. The data also highlight that foundations are likely to share information about something other than the foundation itself. This raises questions about the role of social media for foundations. Specifically, how do foundations view social media engagement in the context of their mission, especially if broad community support is not part of their revenue structure? Again, more research is necessary to understand these trends.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

There is a range of possibilities for Facebook engagement as a strategic communication tool. Social media can facilitate real-world engagement, feedback loops related to performance outcomes, and collaborative decision making (Reddick and Aikins 2012). Unlike website-based information, social media, and especially Facebook, offer opportunities for dialogic communication by providing spaces for stakeholders to interact on topics of mutual interest (Bortree and Seltzer 2009; Sweetser and Lariscy 2008). Providing a space for dialogic communication may be a cost-efficient way for foundations to increase real-world engagement of stakeholders. This includes capturing stakeholder time, talent, and treasure.

To realize gains through social media, foundations should incorporate social media into their overall communications strategy rather than treating it as an isolated task. Foundations should also evaluate effectiveness of social media. Although many nonprofits do not currently evaluate social media presence, numerous analytics are available to help foundations and nonprofits tailor data to understand the engagement of their social media users. This evaluation provides a starting point for improving engagement. Foundations may also engage in content targeting specific stakeholder groups that aligns with an overall communications strategy. Once measurement and analyses discern differing stakeholder groups, foundations can adjust their messages to these different groups. Two-way communication becomes considerably more dialogic when stakeholders are involved in discussions that matter to them.

Finally, the findings presented in this study accentuate the need for continued in-depth analyses that move beyond self-reports of social media presence by foundations. Nonprofits generally report high social media usage. This study analyzed usage and engagement in addition to presence. We found that although Facebook presence is high, usage and stakeholder engagement varied widely among foundations and foundation types, indicating potentially poor or inattentive management of social media platforms. More empirical research and theory building is necessary to understand social media as a strategic communications tool. This research provides an important early step in building that body of work.



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