

Community Action and Social Media

TSRC research 2014-2015

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This research into the role of social media in community action is part of the Below the Radar work-stream at the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) at the University of Birmingham. The work-stream explores the experiences of small community groups and activities and is supported by the Barrow Cadbury Trust. This particular work is being undertaken in collaboration with Local Level

The project began in late 2014 with a literature review and scoping exercise, which comprised semi-structured telephone interviews with eight correspondents known to be working on social media with community groups. This paper was prepared as background and provocation for a research seminar in February 2015. **Your views and thoughts are welcome.**

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The diversity of social media and the diversity of the community sector

The diffusion of social media throughout society and its institutions has been rapid and diverse. The investment of time and energy by citizens, government, businesses and groups is considerable and could not be explained without taking account of a dependable infrastructure of connectivity and the more-or-less parallel development of mobile communications.

Thus, when we explore social media activity by organisations in the UK community sector, we are necessarily talking within the context of a network society – globally connected - with assumptions of mobile connectivity and networked individualism (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Social media reflects and reinforces a number of clear social trends including social diversification, identity, and the assumed weakening of hierarchies. Social change and media change are profoundly entwined (Adolf and Deicke, 2015).

The speed of the diffusion is a very familiar theme, but the *diversity* associated with social media is less widely considered. We discuss this here, briefly, with reference to two dominant themes of study, which are strongly apparent in the literature. These we refer to as F&F, and T&U: they stand for *Facebook and fundraising*; and *Twitter and uprisings*.

This is mildly caricaturing: of course, many organisations are making heavy use of Facebook to present some kind of profile; of Twitter for information sharing, awareness and relationship building; and other platforms such as YouTube for various purposes including marketing and promotion. We think this is a fair reflection of the research that has been published; and it is a helpful way of understanding the diversity of use – although it is fair to note that the majority of research into voluntary and community organisations' use of social media describes to US practice.

Groups and organisations heavily involved with Facebook and fundraising, we suggest, are likely to be working with and within the *status quo* of late capitalism and its emphasis on philanthropy. There is a great deal of interest, especially expressed in US sources, in the use (or potential use) of Facebook and some other platforms for generating income in non-profit organisations. At the same time, those groups and organisations which have made heavy use of Twitter in the interests of social change through social movements – characterised by well-documented examples in the Arab Spring, Maidan in Kiev or with the Occupy movement – are more likely to be values-driven and more ready to resort to subversion.



'Viral' online image of events in Maidan Square, Kiev, 2014

As a crude typology, this allows us to reflect on the diversity of the sector, characterised as it is by independence, social motivation, and significant variation of scale, impact and resources. However, these two very different, dominant research themes could obscure many more nuanced uses being made of social media among groups; and we propose to direct our research particularly at those more nuanced uses. Thus the kinds of question that arise are, for example:

- To what extent does the diversity of the sector map onto the diversity of social media uses – and what can we learn from that?
- Do we need to distinguish community groups involved in self-help and mutual support, from charitable organisations and volunteering or from campaign groups? Are we likely to find clear differences of use of social media?
- What do we know about community activists and groups which choose not to use social media?
- Are we likely to find *transitions* driven by social media use, for example with service-oriented groups getting more involved in campaigning as they feel they can have influence?
- What is going on along the spectrum between *F&F* and *T&U*?

Identifying the benefits of social media use

One of our correspondents pointed to the difference between people *seeing the value* of social media, and *gaining the benefit*, asking 'what can we learn about the difference?' We are not the first to ask where the benefits are evidenced, and we surely won't be the last. There seem to be very few examples clearly demonstrating effect or impact.¹ We are aware of undocumented experience in the field; but the overwhelming impression is of a discrepancy between the enthusiastic rhetoric – often verging on evangelical insistence – and the evidence.

¹ An example is Taylor's (2012) account of the 'Nothing Holy About Hatred' campaign.

There is no shortage in the literature of introductory guidance, sometimes based on a small survey and/or the reflections of enthusiasts, often summarised following debate (e.g. the Guardian Voluntary Sector Network) on social media platforms.² The best of these offer balanced assessment of the challenges and potential. Some typically include statistics about participation levels, passionate exhortations, and unsubstantiated assertions. It's common to find impatience expressed about senior management who 'don't get it'. But repeating words like 'critical' and 'important' at greater volume could prove counter-productive.

Similarly, Zoe Amar (2014) claims that pioneering organisations 'are already using social media to break down internal silos and connect with external stakeholders to create movements for change.' Without evidence, there could be a danger that the rhetoric ends up presenting innovation as an end in itself.

Yet the intuitive logic is compelling. The logic says that social media can enable community groups and organisations to communicate, multi-directionally, more efficiently and inexpensively, and connect with wider networks (globally if appropriate) to raise awareness, publicity and support.

If this is the case, it ought to follow that groups and organisations will be functioning more effectively, accumulating trust, mobilising support, achieving their objectives and generating social benefit in a wide variety of arenas. Is this the case? Possibilities include the following:

- this could be happening, but it's a well-kept secret and research is needed to demonstrate it;
- this could be happening, but only among a small proportion of groups in the sector (research is needed to clarify this);
- it is not happening, and there is a flaw in the logic (ditto);
- it is not happening, because forces that act in the opposite direction (for example, political and economic circumstances) are to some extent cancelling out the advantages (research is needed, along with political action, vigorously supported by social media ...).

Here, we want to refer to one proposal for evaluation guidelines in order to assess impact. De Vera and Murray (2013) suggest four actions for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of a non-profit organisation's use of social media:

1. Identify objectives and goals
2. Define key performance indicators (KPIs) and metrics
3. Collect metrics on a consistent basis
4. Create a master spreadsheet.

This might be too prescriptive or too labour-intensive for some, but wholly sensible for others. It helps us make the point that from our point of view, 'effectiveness' in the community sector needs defining in terms of social change generally or organisational objectives specifically: not the metrics of tweets, likes and views.

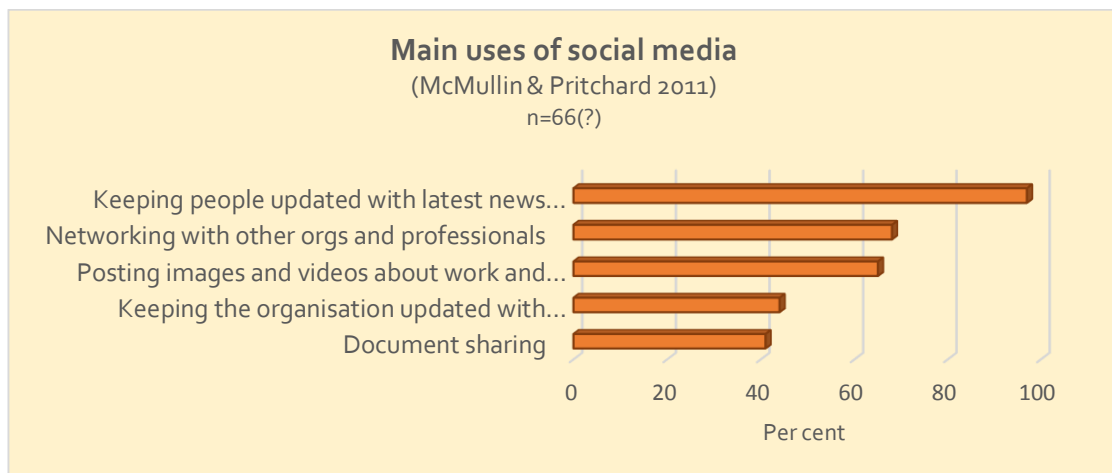
² These 'encouragement' documents include a number of local government reports, e.g. Slee and Caveney (2013), Beresford (2014).

What do we know currently about the use of social media in the UK community sector?

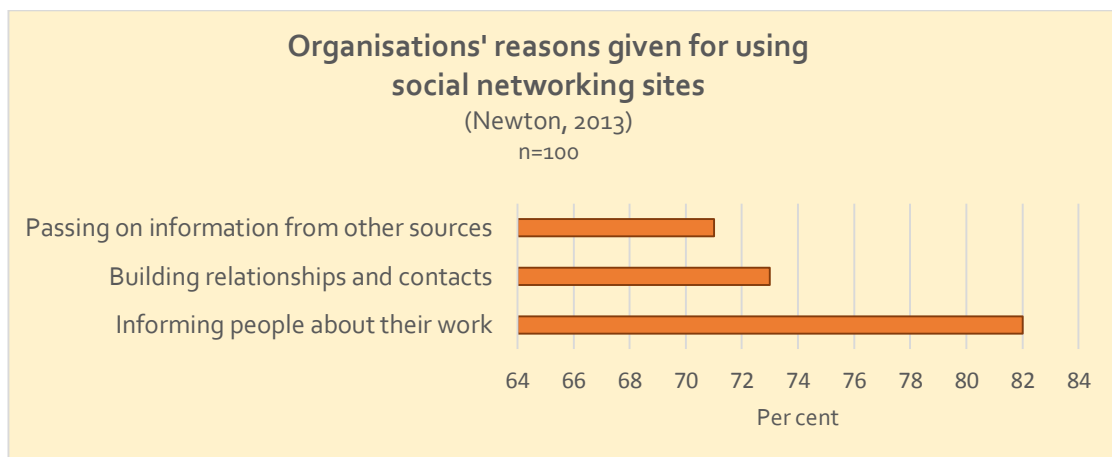
Various sources such as *The Guardian Voluntary Sector Network* point to a great deal of shared learning among established organisations, especially charities. It seems likely that among 'below the radar' groups, practice will be more patchy and dependent on a few key animators and the energy generated by local umbrella organisations. At one level, Zoe Amar (2014) is able to remark that 'Social media is now central to the skillset of chief executives' in the UK voluntary sector; yet at the same time, we know very little about how smaller groups are using these technologies.

Here we offer some of the key points emerging from four relevant surveys carried out in the UK.

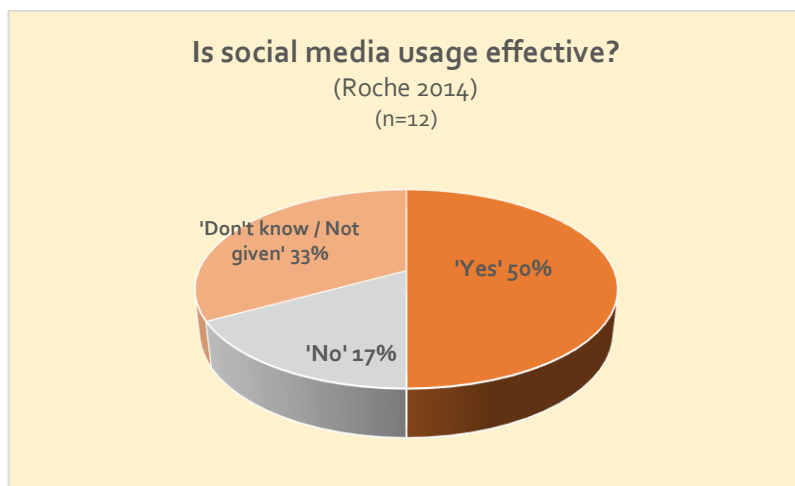
McMullin and Pritchard (2011) report on a survey of Urban Forum membership. Their most interesting finding points to the diversity of purposes:



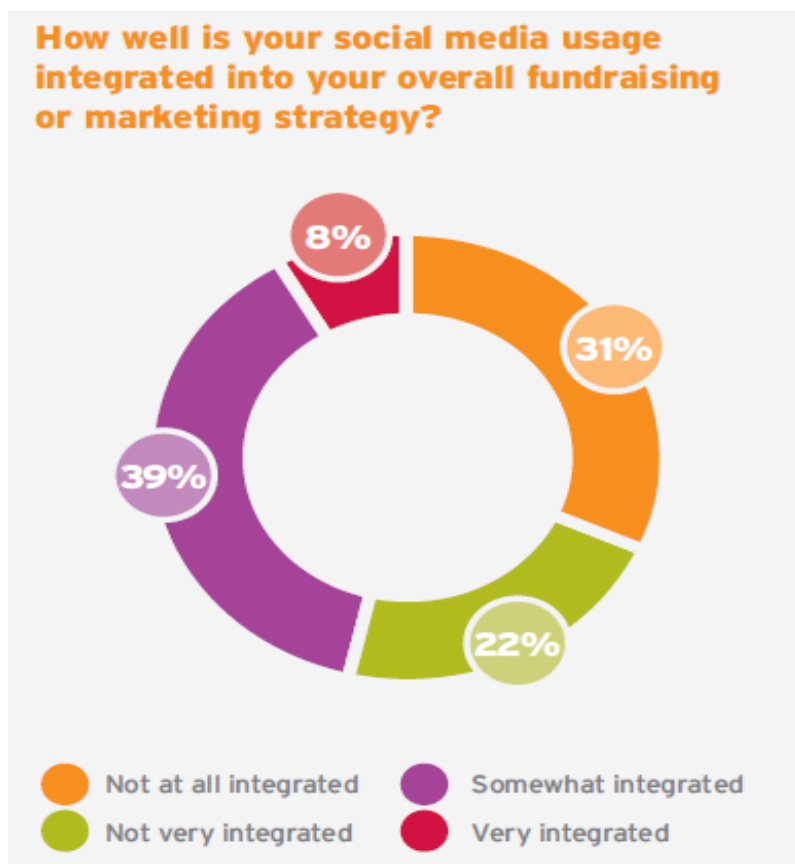
Newton (2013) went back to the same membership and reported on the use of online tools generally. She classifies purpose in a slightly different way:



Roche (2014) surveyed community sector organisations in the West Midlands. This was a smaller sample but reported some confidence in the effectiveness of social media:



Finally, Miranda and Steiner (2013) asked smaller charities and social enterprises about their use of social media in relation to marketing and fundraising:



Miranda and Steiner, 2013, n=186.

Concluding remarks

Amar has suggested social media platforms will become 'more niche' within the next ten years, and social media will become 'core business' within the sector. This begs some questions for the current research. If social media is to become more 'niche' how do community groups (or social movements for that matter) use these as a means of broad-based/mass communication? If social media is core business, what is no longer core? And is social media only niche and/or core in terms of marketing, promotion and communications strategies, or will it fundamentally change the ways in which communities organise? And how can we evidence this?

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