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# Looking for Friends, Fans and Followers? Social Media Use in Public and Nonprofit Human Services

David Campbell

*Binghamton University*, [dcamp@binghamton.edu](mailto:dcamp@binghamton.edu)

Kristina T. Lambricht

*Binghamton University--SUNY*, [klambrig@binghamton.edu](mailto:klambrig@binghamton.edu)

Christopher J. Wells

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# Looking for Friends, Fans and Followers? Social Media Use in Public and Nonprofit Human Services

**Abstract:** This article uses interviews and internet data to examine social media use among nonprofit organizations and county departments involved in the delivery of human services in a six-county area in South Central New York State. Social media use was modest; and nonprofit organizations were much more likely to use it than county departments. Organizations used social media primarily to market organizational activities, remain relevant to key constituencies and raise community awareness. Most organizations either had a narrow view of social media's potential value or lacked long-term vision. Barriers to use included institutional policies, concerns about its inappropriateness for target audiences, and client confidentiality. The findings build on recent research regarding the extent to which nonprofit organizations and local governments use social media to engage stakeholders. Future research should investigate not only the different ways organizations use social media but also whether organizations use it strategically to advance organizational goals.

The proliferation of social media has changed how people provide and receive information, creating fundamentally different ways for individuals to interact with each other and democratizing participation in community life. Social media have the potential to change a wide variety of management practices in nonprofit and public organizations. For example, social media have contributed to innovations in how nonprofit organizations approach fundraising, organizing and advocacy (see Guo & Saxton, in press; Kapin & Ward, 2013 for illustrations); and it is easy to imagine how social media's emphasis on engagement and dialogue could contribute to similar advances in performance measurement for both nonprofit and public organizations (e.g. Kanter & Paine, 2012).

Researchers have shown an increasing interest in the role of social media in nonprofit organizations (Bortree & Seltzer, 2008; Guo & Saxton, in press; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012; Waters & Jamal, 2011) and local government (Bonson, Lourdes, Royo, et al, 2012; Hand & Ching, 2011; Kavanaugh, Fox, Sheetz et al, 2012; Klang & Nolin, 2011). While this research has provided a valuable foundation for understanding social media use in those settings, this article addresses several gaps in our current knowledge. First, much of the recent research in the nonprofit field has examined social media use among large, prominent nonprofit organizations, but not smaller, community-based entities. Similarly, research on social media use by local governments has primarily focused on entities located in larger metropolitan areas. Second, previous studies have considered either nonprofit or public organizations, not both and not comparatively. Finally, researchers have not focused on how leaders in human services use social media to advance organizational goals. The close relationship between human service providers and their stakeholders (particularly beneficiaries and funders) suggests considerable potential for those organizations to draw on social media's

capacity to engage stakeholders. To address these gaps in our knowledge, this study analyzes data gathered through interviews and internet searches to explore how nonprofit organizations and county departments involved in the delivery of human services in a six-county region in South Central New York State use social media. The article addresses the following questions:

1. To what extent are nonprofit and public human service organizations using social media?
2. Why are these organizations using social media? In particular, to what extent do these organizations use social media to engage stakeholders?
3. What vision do these organizations have for future social media use?
4. What are the barriers to social media use?

The literature review focuses on research about how nonprofit organizations and county governments have used social media, particularly for stakeholder engagement. Following our literature review, we detail our data collection methods and key findings. We conclude by exploring the implications of our research and highlighting areas for future study.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA: ORGANIZATIONAL PURPOSES AND USES**

In recent years, the term “social media” has become increasingly popular, and researchers who do not define it run the risk of having key ideas misunderstood. We prefer Kaplan and Haenlein’s (2010) definition of social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p. 61). They characterize Web 2.0, as an open and collaborative system through which users share and modify content, and use that term to describe how the internet currently operates. In that way, Web 2.0 pools collective intelligence, and it is the platform on which social media operates. This definition clarifies social media’s potential value: through the creation and exchange of content, social media offers leaders of organizations the

potential to forge stronger bonds with key stakeholders. In this study, we focus on several widely adopted forms of social media: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs. These forms of social media also have received the most research attention from public administration scholars.

Within the body of literature studying social media use in the nonprofit sector, researchers have analyzed the use of blogs (Kent, 2008; Seltzer & Mitrock, 2007), Facebook (Nah & Saxton, 2012; Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009) and Twitter (Guo & Saxton, in press; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012; Nah & Saxton, 2012; Smitko, 2012). Many social media studies have focused on the experience of large nonprofit organizations (Guo & Saxton, in press; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012; Smitko, 2012). These and other studies reveal a lack of consensus among nonprofit leaders regarding the role of social media in the management of nonprofit organizations. Researchers have found that most nonprofit organizations use Facebook and Twitter as one-way communication tools to share key information about the organization with key constituents, such as using Facebook posts to describe the work of the organization (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012).

Research addressing the role of social media in local government tells a similar story, albeit with a different focus given the nature of democratic governance and the relationship between local government leaders and their constituents. Several studies have identified increased adoption of a range of social media tools among local governments, including Facebook (Bonson, Lourdes, Royo, et al, 2012; Hand & Ching, 2011; Kavanaugh, Fox, Sheetz et al, 2012); Twitter (Bonson et al, 2012; Crump, 2011; Kavanaugh, et al, 2012); blogs (Bonson, et al, 2012) and YouTube (Bonson, et al, 2012). These studies primarily focus on large cities or local governments within large metropolitan areas; and like research in the nonprofit sector,

findings suggest local governments are uncertain about the overall purpose of social media as a tool of government (Kavanaugh et al, 2012; Klang & Nolin, 2011). Perlman's (2012) review of studies about local government indicates that most local governments have used social media primarily for information dissemination on a range of topics, including traffic, emergency management and public safety (Crump, 2011; Hand & Ching, 2011; Kavanaugh, et al, 2012). Some local governments also use social media for marketing purposes, publicizing events or community institutions (Hand & Ching, 2011), comparable to those described in studies of social media use in nonprofit organizations. Local governments' use of social media for information sharing has largely emphasized one-way communication; however, some governments have sought information from constituents to learn things helpful to the operation of government, such as reports of infrastructure problems, criminal activity, and conditions during emergencies (Crump, 2011; Kavanagh, et al, 2012). This pattern is consistent with the development of earlier forms of technology in government. For example, researchers studying the evolution of e-government noted that many local governments initially used e-government primarily for information sharing (Moon, 2002; Norris, 2005; Norris & Moon, 2005).

While empirical research about social media use in public and nonprofit organizations indicates that most use it for one-way communication, many researchers have identified its broader potential to increase communication and engagement with stakeholders (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Henderson & Bowley, 2010; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012; Rybacko & Seltzer, 2010; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). Practitioners have also made the case for using social media to maximize engagement and have identified strategies to accomplish that goal (Kanter & Fine, 2010; Kanter & Paine, 2012; Kapin & Ward, 2013).

We see three distinct theoretical frameworks as helpful in understanding research about social media use in nonprofit and local government settings: (1) by viewing current social media practices in evolutionary terms, (2) by redefining how we analyze social media content and (3) by understanding social media use as a response to competing demands. Mergel & Bretschneider (2013) offer a three-stage model of the “adoption process for new information and telecommunication technologies” in government (p. 391). The process describes the stages through which organizations proceed as they adopt new forms of technology, such as social media. The three phases include: “intreprenurship and innovation,” “constructive chaos” and institutionalization” (p. 392). The first phase involves individual actors innovating, largely operating on their own or within departmental structures. In the “constructive chaos phase,” managers establish a standard setting process and move toward institutionalization, which removes variation in practice and creates predictability in use. This model grows out of a longer line of research assessing the diffusion of technological innovations in local government and the factors that affect it (see Perry & Kraemer, 1978, for example).

A second approach offers a new conceptual framework for understanding social media use that moves beyond characterizing it as either one-way or engagement oriented. Lovejoy & Saxton (2012) analyzed the content of Twitter messages (“tweets”) among the largest nonprofit organizations in the United States and categorized them into three broad types: information, community and action. Tweets categorized as information (59% of those they analyzed) provide content about the organization’s activities, consistent with what other researchers have described as one-way communication; tweets classified as community (26%) emphasize interactivity and relationship building; action tweets (15%) ask stakeholders to act in some way for the organization, such as donating, attending an event or protesting (p. 341-342). Most important,

Lovejoy & Saxton argue that the three categories represent a “hierarchy of engagement” (p. 349), starting with information, then communication and action at the top. Informational tweets, particularly if they direct readers to additional content (such as through the inclusion of a hyperlink) are an initial form of engagement. They argue that the kinds of activities defined as action, “promotion, marketing and mobilization” (p. 350)—and not dialogue, as earlier researchers argued—may reflect what nonprofit leaders perceive as the greatest value they can derive from social media. This approach provides a more nuanced understanding of the range of users’ purposes and what constitutes engagement through social media. Subsequent research has used this framework to analyze how nonprofit organizations use Twitter to advance advocacy goals (Guo & Saxton, in press).

One final way to understand nonprofit and local government organizations’ approach to social media is to see it as a response to two competing demands: one emphasizing transparency and accountability, the other focused on dialogue and civic participation. Several researchers have argued nonprofit and local government social media use prioritizes meeting the public’s expectation of transparency, providing information about a wide range of organizational operations (Klang & Nolin, 2011; Waters, et al, 2009). This view suggests that public service professionals have either de-emphasized the engagement potential of social media or have not yet learned how to develop that capacity.

While literature on nonprofit and local government use of social media is growing, key gaps in our knowledge remain. Specifically, researchers have not focused on how leaders in community-based human service organizations have used social media applications as administrative tools to advance mission-critical goals. Local governments and nonprofit organizations are central actors in this field, both as service providers and funders. Because



human service work involves direct engagement among clients, providers and other key stakeholders, it is an important setting in which to learn whether the norms adopted in this field are similar to those followed in other public service settings. Are human service professionals more likely to use social media to engage stakeholders given the nature of their work or do they use it for purposes that are consistent with other settings (e.g., information dissemination and marketing)? In addition, since earlier research has considered public and nonprofit organizations separately, this study provides a clearer comparison between social media use in both settings. Finally, past research on nonprofit and local government use of social media has generally focused on larger organizations while this study examines use in smaller, community-based entities.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

To address our research questions, we gathered data on social media use from nonprofit organizations and county departments involved in the delivery of human services in a six-county area in South Central New York. We also randomly selected a subsample of organizations for interviews. The county populations in the region ranged from approximately 50,000 to 200,000.

*Entire Sample.* In order to create our sample, we contacted all local United Way chapters which were key human service funders in each of the counties we studied as well as the major local private foundations largely funding human service nonprofit organizations in the region. We also contacted county departments in the region that had contracts with human service nonprofit organizations including: departments of health, mental health, social services, youth services and aging. We asked each funder organization for the names of the nonprofit agencies that their organization funded. Our entire sample consisted of 25 county departments, 17 nonprofit funders and 151 nonprofit providers. We counted each county department as a

separate organization. Thus, all of the counties included in our sample were composed of multiple organizations for the purposes of this study.

County departments played a complicated role in the delivery of human services. All of the county departments funded services delivered by local nonprofit organizations. Many also provided direct human services to county residents. For example, in one county, the Office for Aging operated several senior centers. In some cases, the county departments were using county resources to fund the services delivered by the nonprofit providers. In other cases, the county departments were using grant money received from the state or federal government. However, even in the situations with “pass through” funding, the county departments were performing critical “funder” functions such as selecting the nonprofit providers with which they were contracting and monitoring the services the providers delivered. Thus, the county departments were both “funders” and “providers.” The funder sample also included nonprofit funders (public charities and private foundations) because this group engages with key human services stakeholders. Public charities (community foundations and United Ways) engage with donors and providers; private foundations engage with providers, and often the broader public.

In March and April 2012, we collected data on our entire sample’s use of social media tools. We recorded: (1) whether the organization had Facebook, Twitter and/or YouTube accounts, (2) whether the organization maintained a blog, and (3) the organization’s service area(s). We also identified whether each organization served a vulnerable population because concerns about client privacy may impact the way organizations use social media. We defined vulnerable populations as any group for whom confidentiality is a primary concern such as children who have been abused and individuals with mental illness.

*Interview Sample.* As our second data collection strategy, we randomly selected 40 organizations from our entire sample for semi-structured interviews: 20 nonprofit providers, 10 nonprofit funders, and 10 county human service departments. We interviewed program managers, executive directors and department heads because we were particularly interested in how social media fit into an organization's overall goals and vision. Nonprofit organizations in our interview sample ranged in size from having annual budgets of \$125,000 to \$20 million and no paid staff to roughly 480 employees, with a median budget of approximately \$1.1 million dollars and a median staff size of 9.5. While the median budget size in our sample is in the top quartile of all reporting public charities (Pettijohn, 2013), most of the nonprofit organizations in our sample are still relatively small. The size of most county departments was small too, reflecting the populations of the counties on which we focused. County departments ranged in size from having annual budgets of \$125,000 to \$68 million and 1 half-time employee to roughly 200 employees, with a median budget of \$5.5 million and a median staff size of 5.5. We did not collect comparable data for the entire sample but since we randomly selected the organizations we interviewed, these summary statistics are likely to be representative of the larger sample. All of the organizations we interviewed had physical offices, and none were "virtual" organizations.

The interviews were part of a larger research project and were conducted between July and December 2011. This study focuses on interview respondents' answers to questions about the forms of social media their organizations have used as well as their organization's current goals and long-term vision for using social media. To address concerns about the time lag between when we conducted the interviews and collected the internet data, we compared the data collected using the two different methods and found that use of social media tools was generally

unchanged: only two organizations had adopted Facebook from the time we conducted our interviews to the time we did our internet data collection.

At the beginning of each interview, we guaranteed the confidentiality of the individual being interviewed. Average interview length was 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Initial codes were developed based on the interview protocols. This list of codes was then revised and augmented through an inductive process based on analysis of the interview transcripts using QSR Nvivo 8. Memoing (for a description see Miles and Huberman 1994) and pattern-matching (for a description see Yin, 2013) were also used as part of the data analysis.

In addition, we conducted content analyses of the Facebook pages maintained by organizations from our interview sample in April 2012 since this was the social media tool most commonly used by the entire sample and the interview sample. Of the 40 organizations in our interview sample, 19 had a Facebook page at the time we collected our internet data although 1 organization was not maintaining its account at that time. For each page, we noted the establishment date, date of the most recent post, whether it contained an “Events” section and the date of the most recently created event, if applicable. We calculated the mean number of posts per month based on the total number of posts during the last three months and the mean number of events created per month using the same standard. This information provided a snapshot of how often the organization reached out to the public via Facebook. We were able to collect data on three months even though we only looked at the pages over a two month period because information on posts is archived on Facebook pages and is available indefinitely beginning when a given post is published. We also recorded the number of “likes” the page had received in order to evaluate the extent to which the public reached out to the organization. Finally, the

information in the page's "About" section was categorized based on content and the organization's last five posts were thematically coded to assess the reasons why organizations were posting on Facebook. The same coding system developed to classify the interviews was used to categorize the reasons why organizations were posting on Facebook.

***The Research Design's Strengths and Limitations.*** This study's research design has important advantages. Our approach provides an overall picture of what social media tools different organizations in our sample were using as well as detailed information on how and why a subset of our sample used these tools. By collecting interview data and conducting content analyses of Facebook pages, we are also able to compare interviewee claims about Facebook usage with their actual practices. While this study's research design has benefits, it has limitations as well. Our study focused on human service organizations located in a six-county region that included small and medium-sized cities and the surrounding suburban and rural communities. As a result, many organizations we interviewed were relatively small both in terms of budget and staff size. This may limit the generalizability of our findings to larger organizations that may have more access to technology and greater capacity to use this technology. In addition, our findings may not be generalizable to "virtual" organizations that lack physical offices or to organizations using forms of social media other than Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs. Finally, given the rapid adoption of social media, some of our findings, which are based on data collected in 2011 and 2012, may not reflect current usage patterns.

## **FINDINGS**

Our findings explore how nonprofit organizations and county departments involved in the delivery of human services have utilized social media and their vision for using these tools in the

future. Facebook was the most commonly utilized form of social media. Nonprofit providers and funders were much more likely to use social media than county departments. Key reasons for using social media included marketing organizational activities, remaining relevant to key constituencies, and raising community awareness. Only one interviewee indicated her organization was using social media to gather constituent feedback. In terms of future use, the vast majority of interviewees either: (1) had a limited view of social media and did not recognize its potential to create interactive dialogues, (2) were still developing their long-term vision for social media or (3) lacked any long-term vision. Interviewees also identified several other barriers to using social media.

*Adoption.* Table 1 details the percentage of organizations in our entire sample that used various forms of social media broken down by organization type. The most common form of social media used was Facebook: 49% of our entire sample had Facebook accounts. By contrast, only 9% maintained a YouTube channel, the next most popular medium. The findings on social media use are generally consistent with interviewee reports.

Closer analysis of interviewees' Facebook pages reveals that the majority of these organizations were relatively new users of Facebook and did not have high levels of activity on their pages. Only 6 of the 19 organizations in our interview sample with Facebook pages had held their account for more than two years, and the oldest Facebook account was 39 months old. Among this same group of organizations, the average number of Facebook page "Likes" was 109, the average number of posts in the prior three months was 5, and only 3 organizations had created "events" on Facebook in the last 3 months.

We also analyzed social media use by organization type and found important differences. As illustrated by Table 1, nonprofit providers and funders were much more likely to use social

media than county departments, with only two of the seventeen county departments using any type of social media. This pattern is especially evident when examining Facebook use: 56% of nonprofit providers and 40% of nonprofit funders used Facebook while just 1 county department had a Facebook account. Facebook use was lower for specific organization subgroups in our sample than adoption rates reported in other studies: 65 of the 100 largest nonprofits in the United States (Nah & Saxton, 2012), 87% of nonprofit advocacy organizations and 17% of European municipal governments (Bonson et al., 2012) had Facebook pages. The difference between the usage rates of other social media by subgroups in our sample and the usage rates reported in existing research was even more dramatic: 73% of the largest nonprofits (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012) and 80% of nonprofit advocacy organizations (Guo and Saxton, in press) used Twitter; 29% of European municipalities studied had a YouTube channel and 32% used Twitter (Bonson et al., 2012).

In addition to usage differences between nonprofit and public organizations, organizations exclusively serving “vulnerable” populations whose privacy was a primary concern were less likely to maintain social media accounts than organizations serving non-vulnerable populations. Again, this trend was most pronounced with Facebook use: more than half of the organizations serving non-vulnerable populations used Facebook compared to 31% of those serving vulnerable populations.

***Current Use.*** Table 2 details the number of interviewees who identified specific goals for using social media. Only interviewees who were currently using or had used social media in the past were asked about their goals. The most common reason why interviewees indicated that their organization used social media was to promote organizational activities, with respondents in thirteen interviews identifying this goal. One nonprofit provider described his organization’s

use of social media this way: “To get our name out there, to share information. Sometimes we’re the best kept secret. This is what we’re doing, come support us or participate in this event or this could benefit you.” Another important goal identified in seven of the interviews was to remain up-to-date in the eyes of key constituencies. As one nonprofit funder commented: “We started it [using social media] because of the younger generation but also for funding Event X. That’s a signature fundraiser. We haven’t been successful in getting kids to go so we thought Facebook invitations may help.” In addition, respondents in two interviews mentioned that their organization currently used social media to educate the public regarding issues pertinent to their organization. For example, one nonprofit provider indicated their organization used social media to increase “mental health literacy.” Only one interviewee reported her organization was using social media to engage beneficiaries and learn about their experiences.

The purposes of Facebook posts identified in our analysis of interviewee Facebook pages were generally consistent with our interview findings. The most common purposes of Facebook posts include to market organizational activities (16 organizations) and to raise community awareness about issues important to the organization (6 organizations). Thirteen of the sixteen organizations using Facebook to market organizational activities had posts that promoted specific events. Our analysis of Facebook pages also identified other ways that organizations used social media that were not mentioned in the interviews such as to thank key constituencies, to direct the public to their organization’s website or blog, and to recruit volunteers and staff. Similar to the interview data, none of Facebook posts indicated that organizations were using social media as a tool for gathering constituent feedback.

***Long-term Vision.*** Most interviewees had a limited vision for social media in their organizations. In just 16 of the 40 interviews, respondents were able to identify long-term goals



that their organizations had for social media (detailed in Table 3); those goals are consistent with interviewees' current goals. The most common long-term goals mentioned by respondents were to market organizational activities, to remain relevant to key organizational constituencies and to raise community awareness. However, only three respondents, all from nonprofit organizations, identified that social media could give their organizations an opportunity to engage directly with constituents by collecting feedback or participating in shared learning. Respondents in two interviews hoped to use social media as a mechanism for collecting feedback from clients. In the words of one of these respondents:

There are opportunities to use Twitter to potentially engage beneficiaries in a dialogue about their experiences. People do that on Facebook too. You post and they comment or share so that's a direction I would like to see us move in.

Only one respondent discussed the potential that social media offers for organizations to learn from each other. According to this respondent:

It's [social media is] used for mobilization around particular topics or issues people are concerned about and as a way to help them to move into more systematic ways of thinking. There's some real value to embedding within websites or social media, sort of a lot of heavy thinking needed to be done around a particular topic. For example, we get people who don't interface with us directly but have a great idea about something and want to run with it, they replicate something that someone else has already done and make the same mistakes, have the same failures and the thing goes away. In the meantime they've devoted a tremendous amount of their own resources to it, whether it's time or anything else. Wouldn't it be great if they could put themselves into a network where they could see fairly quickly where they fit within the system and they could tap into those experiences that have already taken place and essentially locate themselves in this system?

Respondents in six interviews indicated that their organizations were discussing their long-term visions for social media, but still had not determined the desired direction. One county department head even commented: "Our long-term vision is to get a long-term vision." In three of the six interviews in which respondents indicated they were still developing their long-term vision, interviewees were able to identify at least one long-term organizational social

media goal. In the three other interviews, respondents could not name any long-term goals. Finally, 21 other respondents indicated their organization lacked any long-term vision and did not have immediate plans to discuss the issue. Reflecting the sentiments of many interviewees, one nonprofit provider stated when asked about her organization's long-term vision: "No, I'm just starting to look at it [social media] and understand it."

***Barriers to Using Social Media.*** In addition to having a limited vision for social media, interviewees identified several other reasons why they either could not use social media or were reluctant to use it. As illustrated by Table 4, the most common barrier was institutional policies: respondents in five county government interviews reported that access to social media sites was blocked for at least some employees in their organization. Institutional policies were not mentioned as a barrier by any of the nonprofit organizations.

Another barrier was the concern that social media were inappropriate because of an organization's target population. Three of the four interviewees who raised this concern worked for organizations in which youth were the target population. For example, when asked what her organization's vision for social media was, one nonprofit provider responded "I don't know that we know enough. Our type of population [at-risk youth] makes you cautious. I'm not sure. It [social media] can be misused and vicious. Twitter even scares me." The other interviewee who referenced his organization's target population worked for a county and indicated that his department did not provide any direct services so he did not believe that using social media to market organizational activities would be effective.

In addition, respondents in three interviews reported that their organizations were reluctant to use social media due to client confidentiality concerns. These respondents were

worried about violating client confidentiality particularly through the use of client names or pictures on a social media site. In the words of one interviewee:

I think it's [social media is] something we would stay away from, because that is right from the state level [of the Department of Social Services]. They have had a big emphasis over the last year about protection of confidential information. They pointed out that it's something you really need to think about before you start using it.

Other concerns about social media mentioned in multiple interviews include lacking the capacity and staff expertise to manage social media.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study examines how nonprofit organizations and county departments involved in the delivery of human services use social media. Our findings are generally consistent with past research about the way in which public and nonprofit organizations use social media; however we have also learned valuable new information about the role of social media in human services, notably the extent of usage, perceptions of utility (both present and future), barriers to adoption and key differences in the approach of public and nonprofit organizations. The study found a modest number of nonprofit organizations were using Facebook, and few were using other forms of social media. Very few county departments in our sample were using any form of social media. Consistent with earlier studies, most of the organizations utilizing Facebook were relatively new users and used social media to market organizational activities, to remain relevant to key constituents, and to raise awareness of their organization's work. Only one interviewee reported currently using social media as a tool for creating interactive dialogues with stakeholders, and only three interviewees envisioned using social media in this way in the future. Finally, interviewees highlighted a variety of barriers impeding social media use.

Our literature review identified two studies which addressed social media adoption rates for nonprofit organizations (Guo & Saxton, in press; Nah & Saxton, 2012). While the

organizations in those studies are different in important ways from those in this study, comparing this study with the earlier two may help us interpret our results. Social media adoption rates by nonprofit organizations in our study are lower than those reported in the earlier studies: 54% of nonprofits in our study used Facebook compared to 65% in large nonprofit organizations (Nah & Saxton, 2012) and 87% in nonprofit advocacy organizations (Guo & Saxton, in press). Twitter adoption rates show an even more dramatic contrast, with 6% in our study using it compared to 73% in large nonprofit organizations (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012) and 80% in advocacy organizations (Guo and Saxton, in press). One explanation may have to do with the types of organizations in our sample. The much higher Facebook and Twitter adoption rates among nonprofit advocacy organizations, suggests that organizational purpose, in this case, advocacy versus human service delivery, may affect social media use. In fact, other research (Nah & Saxton, 2012) has found that advocacy activity is related to social media use. This explanation, however, does not fully account for the near absence of Twitter use among the organizations in our study. One can argue that institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) may account for the high levels of Twitter adoption among advocacy and large nonprofit organizations. While Twitter use may have become a norm among those organizations, the organizations we studied provided no evidence that Twitter use was an expectation among stakeholders. Another explanation for this difference may be that the organizations in our study were smaller than organizations in Lovejoy and Saxton's study and may have lacked the "pre-existing resources and capacities" related to technology (Nah and Saxton, 2012, p. 306), that other research has found to be important factors influencing social media usage. Notably, however, Nah and Saxton (2012) did not find a significant relationship between asset size and social media use in their sample of the 100 largest American nonprofit organizations.

Overall, the nonprofit organizations in our study that were using social media presented a limited view of the actual and potential value of social media for their organizations. This finding is consistent with earlier research that nonprofit organization staff use social media in limited ways (Lovejoy, et al 2012; Waters, et al, 2009). Our analysis revealed that marketing organizational activities, in many cases by promoting events, was one of the primary purposes for social media communication among organizations in our sample. While this purpose appears to be one-way in nature, Lovejoy & Saxton's framework (2012) categorizes content designed to promote an event as "action" and a form of engagement, because it asks constituents to "do something" (p. 345). In fact, the emphasis we found on promoting events provides support for Lovejoy & Saxton's characterization of "action" content as the highest priority for nonprofit organization users of social media. At the same time, the lack of well-developed visions for future use, the limited volume of Facebook posts and the essential absence of Twitter use among our sample suggest that the organizations we studied are continuing to struggle to define how they can use social media to advance organizational goals.

One benefit of our use of interviews for data is that they provide a helpful complement to recent research on social media content, by giving us more information about the thinking behind the content interviewees post on social media sites. In nearly all cases, the interviews displayed an absence of well-developed, strategic thinking regarding how to use social media to advance organizational goals. In this way, the focus on "action" content among the organizations in our sample is not reflective of Lovejoy & Saxton's characterization of it as the "apex" of their "hierarchy of engagement" (349-350). Researchers may want to consider further the conditions under which "action" content reflects this apex and when it does not. For example, it would be

valuable to examine whether “action” content achieves engagement goals in the absence of strategic thinking.

As noted, only two of seventeen county human service departments in our sample had any social media accounts. Similar to our findings about nonprofit organizations, these numbers are lower than what other studies of local government social media use have found, although in contrast to this study, they focused on usage at the municipal rather than departmental level (Hand & Ching, 2011; Bonson et al., 2012). We found that a key barrier preventing county departments from using social media was institutional policies that blocked access to social media sites for at least some employees; in fact respondents in five of ten county department interviews cited institutional policies as a barrier. In contrast, none of the nonprofit organizations in this study mentioned this obstacle. This finding is consistent with Kling & Nolin’s (2011) assertion that local governments focus more on regulating how their employees use social media than in advancing its benefits for democratic participation. Others have similarly argued that public administrator have used innovations in technology to advance management interests over engagement goals (Kraemer & King, 2006; Norris, 2006). It is unclear which stage of Mergel and Bretschneider’s (2013) model for social media adoption this result reflects. It could be that county departments in our study have not had innovators or entrepreneurs who have experimented with social media or it could be that experimentation led to the institutionalization of policies that prohibited social media use. To answer that question would depend on data collected about social media policies and practices for county governments as a whole; our study only collected data from individual departments within those governments. The finding suggests the need for more study about the status of social media in local governments.

Our findings also help us to understand barriers to using social media use among public and nonprofit organizations involved in human service delivery. Concerns about client confidentiality are a major issue in human services, and a variety of codes and laws address these issues including the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), state and federal confidentiality laws, the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (1996), and state licensing laws. Consistent with this perspective, some interviewees indicated that they were reluctant to use social media due to concerns about client confidentiality and its appropriateness for high risk populations, and organizations exclusively serving "vulnerable" populations were less like to maintain social media accounts than organizations serving non-vulnerable populations. Related concerns emerged in the development of e-government; 29% of local government respondents to a 2002 survey identified privacy as a barrier to e-government (Norris & Moon, 2005, p. 71). Nonetheless, we are unclear about the best way to interpret this finding. Many of the ways in which organizations use social media do not violate confidentiality standards or threaten vulnerable populations. Social media users can generate content in all three categories of Lovejoy & Saxton's (2012) engagement framework, such as calling people to action or sharing information, without revealing the identity of clients or placing them in compromising situations. The reluctance of staff in these organizations to adopt social media may reflect a lack of familiarity with its potential. At the same time, the findings could suggest that they believe social media has limited utility for their organizations which has discouraged adoption.

The absence of vision about how to use social media was another important barrier limiting social media use. In our introduction we identified a range of ways in which public service professionals can use social media in public and nonprofit organizations, for fundraising,

advocacy and performance measurement, to name a few. The results of this study suggests that before nonprofit organizations and county departments involved in human service delivery can take advantage of those capacities, they need to develop a greater understanding of these capacities and how to use them. Less than half of our interviewees were able to articulate their organization's vision for social media and those who did had a narrow vision of its potential uses. Only three interviewees envisioned greater constituent engagement through social media. These findings suggest that the leaders of the organizations in our sample lack knowledge about the potential ways in which they can use social media to advance their goals.

To increase awareness of social media's potential value, scholars should share their research with leaders of public and nonprofit organizations on how social media can be used not just for one-way communication but also to engage stakeholders in interactive dialogues. In addition, it might be helpful for scholars to detail ways social media can be used without violating client confidentiality. Ideally, this research would be presented using non-technical language and in a format that is accessible for practitioners such as an issue brief rather than as a full-length journal article.

Finally, our findings highlight several areas for future research. We need more refined analysis on the types of public and nonprofit organizations that are most likely to use social media. We limited our analysis to public and nonprofit organizations involved in human services. Drawing on Nah and Saxton (2012), many other characteristics are likely to influence social media practices in local government and nonprofit organizations, such as the primary age group of organizations' target populations, organization size and level of information technology support. Another finding that public management scholars should explore is how social media use in county government varies by service area. Our findings about social media use in county



human service departments differed from previous studies of other divisions of local government. It would also be useful to learn whether perceptions of social media and its value vary by where in local government an individual works or, similarly, by type of nonprofit organization. Finally, social media remains a relatively new and dynamic phenomenon. Many of this study's findings may be time-sensitive. As county and nonprofit human service organizations become more comfortable with social media, they may be more likely to integrate them into their service delivery system and use them for broader purposes. Changes in technology and the types of social media available may also affect usage. Nonprofit and public administration scholars should continue to investigate social media as technology and organizational practices evolve.

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**Table 1. Use of Different Social Media**

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<i>Type of Social Media</i>	<i>County Dept. Count (%) Total n=17</i>	<i>Nonprofit Funder Count (%) Total n=25</i>	<i>Nonprofit Provider Count (%) Total n=151</i>	<i>Entire Sample Count (%)</i>
Facebook	1 (6%)	10 (40%)	85 (56%)	96 (49%)
Twitter	0 (0%)	2 (8%)	8 (5%)	10 (5%)
YouTube	1 (6%)	4 (16%)	13 (9%)	18 (9%)
Blogs	0 (0%)	2 (8%)	11 (7%)	13 (7%)
Other	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	11 (7%)	11 (6%)

**Table 2. Social Media Goals Cited by Interviewees with Active Social Media Accounts**

<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Respondent Count (%) Total n=17</i>
Marketing	13 (76%)
Relevance	7 (41%)
Fundraising	3 (18%)
Community awareness	2 (12%)
Communication with beneficiaries	1 (6%)

Note: Some interviewees mentioned multiple goals for social media. Our analysis of Facebook pages in April 2012 included 19 organizations' Facebook pages. Two of the nonprofit providers with Facebook pages that were analyzed did not have their Facebook pages at the time of the interviews.

*Table 3. Future Social Media Goals Cited by Interviewees*

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<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Respondent Count (%) n=40</i>
Marketing	10 (25%)
Community awareness	3 (8%)
Relevance	2 (5%)
Fundraising	2 (5%)
Communication with beneficiaries	2 (5%)
Recruitment	1 (3%)
Programming support	1 (3%)
Shared learning	1 (3%)
Vision still being developed	6 (15%)
No vision	21 (53%)

*Table 4. Barriers to Using Social Media Cited by Interviewees*

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<i>Concern</i>	<i>Respondent Count (%) n=40</i>
Institutional policies	5 (13%)
Inappropriate for target population	4 (10%)
Client confidentiality	3 (8%)
Staff-equipment capacity	3 (8%)
Lack of expertise	2 (5%)