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# Social Media in Third Sector Research: A Literature Review

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### **Abstract**

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and social media like Facebook or Twitter are changing the third sector. Earlier research dating back to 2000 was mainly dedicated to shedding light on the question of how ICTs “re”shape non-profit organisations (Burt and Taylor, 2000). Non-profits are faced with a growing need to apprehend and adopt new information and communication technologies (Waters, 2007). Research on social networks includes the use of Facebook to engage stakeholders (Bortree and Seltzer, 2009), the opportunity to raise money (Saxton and Wang, 2013), attract volunteers for an organisation (Zorn et al., 2013) or strengthen public trust and support issues by using digital real-time advocacy (Guo and Saxton, 2013). Drawing on a literature review of articles published between 2007 and 2014, this paper looks at trends, developments and research gaps in third sector research on ICTs and social media in specific.

## 1. Introduction

‘The Internet has given nonprofits an unprecedented arsenal of resources to disseminate their messages and communicate directly with stakeholders’, Waters and Lo note in 2012. Different social networking sites offer various ways to facilitate dialogue, provide information about an organisation, ways to donate money or search for volunteers. The opportunities and challenges of nonprofits use of the Internet are manifold. Given the social role of nonprofits and their growing meaning in shaping and changing society, one would assume that the amount of literature on this topic is—given the fact that *Facebook* is already over 10 years old—much higher, than it actually is. For research on *Facebook*, Caers found that—compared to for-profits that have become more and more familiar with social media—‘the non-profit sector appears to be lagging behind’ (Caers *et al.*, 2013, p. 993). The number of published literature reviews which deal with philanthropy and ICTs is limited, with reviews also being restricted in regards to the time period and the specific discipline they look at, e.g. charitable giving from a marketing perspective, social psychology combined with helping behaviour, or volunteering and economic theories (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011). But the same is true for social media and nonprofits in Media and Communication Studies. Although social networking services have gained considerable attention throughout recent years, ‘there is as yet little research conducted on the broader scope of SNS in the rapidly emerging literature’ (Zhang and Leung, 2014, p. 2).

## 2. What is the Current State of Research on the ‘networked nonprofit’?

This review combines the results from (1) a snowball sampling<sup>1</sup> along with (2) a systematic review of selected major journals for nonprofit and philanthropic studies. When Bekkers and Wiepking conducted their literature review on empirical studies in philanthropy, they included a wide range of journals. A list created by the European Research Network on Philanthropy (ERNOP), generated out of the journals in their study that published at least one empirical article, was then used to provide a starting point regarding the philanthropic journals, even though they point out, that the list is ‘likely to lack names of journals that published articles on NGOs, nonprofit management, volunteering or corporate social responsibility’ (European

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<sup>1</sup> The snowball sampling includes articles from Google scholar for April 2013 to March 2014.

Research Network on Philanthropy, 2014). The review conducted by Zhang and Leung will be used to include the six most influential journals for media and communication studies.

The articles used for this literature review are based on a full text search for the following combinations of keywords: 'social media' AND ('philanthropy' OR 'nonprofit' OR 'third sector'). The following academic archives were accessed for the research: (1) Emerald Insights, (2) SAGE Journals (Social Sciences & Humanities), (3) Elsevier ScienceDirect, (4) SpringerLink, (5) Wiley Interscience, (6) EBSCO, and (7) the Web of Science by Thomson Reuters. The results were refined, duplicates and articles that were solely of a theoretical nature were excluded.<sup>2</sup> This research method generated a total of 64 articles.

Table 1 provides an overview on the journals and illustrates the number of articles by year. All in all, I found that 32 different journals included articles on nonprofits and ICTs and/or social media within the selected time period. However, three to five journals can be said to hold the majority of articles for the years from 2007 to 2014. *Public Relations Review*, the *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, as well as *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, are the leading journals. Nevertheless, the table shows that while *Public Relations Review* published continuously on that topic, VOLUNTAS as well as *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* started with publishing articles on that topic only two years ago. Besides the dominant journals, a broad range of journals at least one article within the time period. In such cases, the articles focus on very specific questions, that somehow involve nonprofits or social media. For example, the article *Nonprofit and Public Sector Participation in Self-Organizing Information Networks: Twitter Hashtag and Trending Topic Use During Disasters*, by Wukich and Steinberg (2013), focusses on the intervention and dialogue of nonprofits with the public during a crisis (e.g. the Boston Marathon bombing) and which was published in the journal *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*.

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<sup>2</sup> However, two articles with a focus on theory were included as they have a significant impact on the empirical research.

**Table 1.** Number of articles on Nonprofits and ICTS and/or social media in TOP 15 Journals

Journal	Year											Total		
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2014	2014	Total			
Public Relations Review			3	1	3	2	1	2				12		
International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing			1	1		1	4					7		
Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly					2		4	1				7		
VOLUNTAS						1	2	1				4		
Nonprofit Management and Leadership	2							1				3		
Journal of Communication Management						1	1					2		
Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication					1	1						2		
Corporate Communications: An International Journal					2							2		
BMC Public Health							1					1		
Journal of Creative Communications								1				1		
Television & New Media								1				1		
Journal of Intercultural Communication Research							1					1		
Public Performance & Management Review						1						1		
Journal of Public Relations Research										1		1		
Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy										1		1		
[Other journals]						5	2	6	3	10	9	17	64	
<b>Total</b>						<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>64</b>

### 3. Findings: Topics, Methods, and Research Gaps

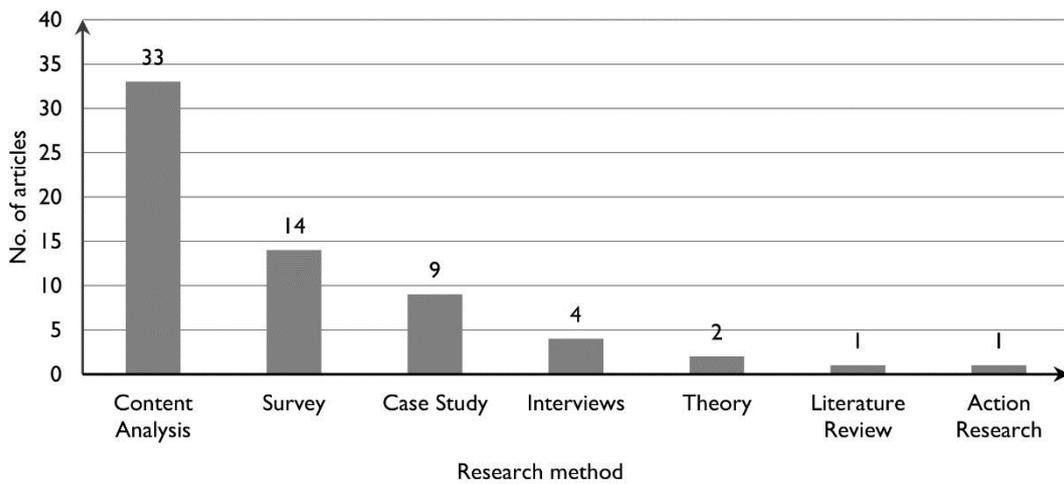
The following topics were identified during my analysis: (1) Dialogue & Relationship, (2) Adoption of ICTs and social media, (3) Giving and Fundraising, (4) the use of the web or social media for advocacy, (5) Accountability, (6) for Evaluation purposes, (7) (virtual) Volunteering, and minor topics (see Table 2). While some topics are researched from 2007 onwards, like for example *Giving & Fundraising*, other topics like *Adoption* were also published in 2007, when researchers analysed the adoption of ICTs and then again in 2012–2014, when they turned to the adoption of social media and ICTs. *Crowdsourcing*, for example, has not been yet satisfactorily explored. *Dialogue & Relationship*, *Adoption of ICTs and social media*, as well as *Giving and Fundraising* are the topics addressed most often.

**Table 2.** Topics per year

Topic	Year								Total
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	
Dialogue & Relationship			2	1	5	2	4	3	17
Adoption	4			2	1	2	4	1	14
Giving & Fundraising	1		2		1	2	3	3	12
Advocacy			1			2	3	1	7
Accountability					2	1	1	1	5
Evaluation		1			1		2		4
Volunteering		1						1	2
Not applicable				1					1
Consumption								1	1
Crowdsourcing								1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>64</b>

It is also crucial to take a closer look at the research methods employed. Figure 1 and table 3 show which methods were used by the researchers in combination with the research topics. Content analyses was the method used most often, followed by surveys and case studies. Often, only one research method was employed by the researcher/s. Less often, two methods were used in combination. Also, specific research topics seem to trigger specific methods. *Dialogue & Relationship*, for example, is most often analysed by using a content analysis (Bortree and Seltzer, 2009; Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012); here in 13 cases. Although interviews are not used very often, this finding somehow points to a deficit, as nonprofit organisations vary enormously regarding their mission, management, vision, and a number of other factors.

Figure 1. Research methods used



Waters and Jamal (2011) studied how *Twitter* is used for building dialogue in their article *Tweet, tweet, tweet: A content analysis of nonprofit organizations' Twitter updates*. Using traditional models of public relations they analysed the tweets of 81 nonprofit organisations in the United States collected in March 2010. Nonprofit organisations dealing with public/society benefit (44.4%), health (25.9%), and human services (14.8%) were the organisations most prominent on *Twitter* (Waters and Jamal, 2011, p. 322). To a much lesser degree, organisations from religion (7.4%), arts and culture (3.7%), and education (3.7%) were represented in the sample. The range in the number of followers was disperse, ranging from 91 to 19,522 followers. The average number of updates during the one month period were 421.9. However, no matter how high the number of updates is, an important topic is how they use them to connect with the public. Here they showed that 'public information was the most widely used model of all four models' (Waters and Jamal, 2011, p. 323). Therefore they shared updates, announcements, and upcoming dates. More than half of the information they shared were from their own organisation (54.7%), including links to their own website, the blog, newsletter, news releases, or research findings. While these approaches were limited, because they are one-way-communication, two-way-communications strategies such as asking users to participate in a survey (24.7%), a TweetUp (38.7%) or signing online petitions (19.4%) were activities were followers were able to change into a responsive mode to the nonprofit (Waters and Jamal, 2011, p. 323). Besides that, the nonprofits and their followers engaged in already existing conversations (8%) or used the @-sign to actively get their followers involved into a discussion. Nevertheless, Waters and Jamal conclude that one-way communication was the predominate modus operandi.

**Table 3.** Number of articles on topic and research method

Research Method	Year								Total
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	
<b>Content Analysis</b>	<b>3</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>33</b>
Accountability					2		1	1	4
Adoption	3					1	1		5
Advocacy			1			2	2	1	6
Dialogue & Relationship			1	1	4	2	2	3	13
Evaluation							1		1
Giving & Fundraising			1			1	1	1	4
<b>Survey</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>14</b>
Adoption	1			1	1		2		5
Dialogue & Relationship			1				1		2
Evaluation					1		1		2
Giving & Fundraising	1				1	1	1	1	5
<b>Case Study</b>			<b>2</b>			<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>9</b>
Accountability						1			1
Adoption								1	1
Advocacy							1		1
Crowdsourcing								1	1
Dialogue & Relationship							1		1
Giving & Fundraising			1				1	1	3
Not applicable			1						1
<b>Interviews</b>		<b>1</b>			<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>		<b>4</b>
Adoption						1	1		2
Dialogue & Relationship					1				1
Evaluation		1							1
<b>Theory</b>		<b>1</b>						<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
Consumption								1	1
Volunteering		1							1
<b>Literature Review</b>								<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
Volunteering								1	1
<b>Action Research</b>				<b>1</b>					<b>1</b>
Adoption				1					1
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>64</b>

This finding is also shared by a study conducted by Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton (2012). They used a sample of 73 nonprofits on *Twitter* collected in 2009. In the main, they also found that the range in the number of followers per account differs widely, that nonprofits from public/society benefit (37%)<sup>3</sup> and healthcare (26%) used *Twitter* most often (Lovejoy *et al.*, 2012, pp. 315ff). Nonprofits often used hyperlinks within their tweets (68%). On the contrary, pictures (1.3%) and videos (only one account) were not used to a greater extent. Addressing followers was used in at least 16.2%—the same applies to retweets—hashtags were used in 30%. Lovejoy *et al.* conclude that ‘there have been only minimal results that indicate social media results in conversation and community building’ (Lovejoy *et al.*, 2012, p. 316). Typically, this has to be attributed to the people doing public relations within the organisa-

<sup>3</sup> This is the ratio of the percentages analysed of all tweets.

tions, as they note: ‘Organizations are only limited in how they use Twitter by the imaginations of their communicators’ (Lovejoy *et al.*, 2012, p. 317).

The *Adoption* of ICTs and/or social media by nonprofits is a research topic that was explored very early and to a larger extent than for example *Advocacy*, *Volunteering*, or *Evaluation*. In addition, research on the adoption is explored using a wide range of approaches. One of the last articles on the adoption of social media is conducted by Zorn, Grant and Henderson (2013). They explored the potential of social media for increasing the effectiveness of nonprofit. Using a survey and two case studies, they discover that nonprofits in New Zealand did not take full advantage of social media. While they found that 96.5% used e-mails to communicate, only 29.3% used blogs, even less used Wikis (23%) or social networking (27.2%) (Zorn *et al.*, 2013, p. 674). Lack of resources and a lack in the perceived usefulness of using social media tools were mentioned as reasons to not use social media. Furthermore, based on the findings from the two case studies, they argue that the budget of a nonprofit might play a certain role, especially in terms of sustaining the knowledge on social media practice within an organisation. As a consequence, nonprofits that heavily rely on the volunteers might not only lose a helping hand but also valuable experience on the use of social media within the organisation.

Since practitioners back in 2007 often claimed that the effect of online donations were more or less small and therefore unimportant to explore further at that point in time, fundraising, donations and giving to nonprofits via the web in general or social media platforms (or applications) like *Facebook* in specific, are of growing interests for researchers (Miller, 2009; Ingenhoff and Koelling, 2009; Waddingham, 2013; McDougale and Handy, 2014). With the rise of social media for fundraising, new outlets for information about an organisation had been created. However, the use of social media for fundraising is a somewhat recent topic to the research of nonprofits and social media, as Laura Whitaker (2014) notes. Bryan Miller (2009) from *Cancer Research UK*, for example, emphasised that the ‘network society’, as well as changes in the information patterns of consumers, may have led to a shift in how people will decide on where to donate money and where not. A growing deficit in trust in established media sources and governmental institutions on the one side, may be countered by a system—generating trust through online recommendation. Online Peer-to-peer recommendation makes it easy to share something through a users social network with other people in the users network. Thereby, the nonprofit reaches people they would not be able to reach via their own network. Nonprofits should therefore try to make sharing their messages and events

as simple as possible. Similarly, nonprofits should analyse where the traffic to their websites originates from. Through the example of *justgiving.com*, Miller shows, how the amount of traffic to this website has fundamentally changed within August 2007 and July 2008. While most of the traffic came from *google.com* in the beginning, at the end, *Facebook* accounted for more than 20% of the traffic, compared to then about 17% for the search engine Google (2009, p. 369). Miller is of the opinion that this shift requires not only new skillsets for the employees, but also ‘new ways of testing and evaluating our fundraising activity’ (2009, p. 370).

Four years later, Jonathan Waddingham (2013) of *JustGiving UK* explained in his article *The future of Facebook fundraising* how fundraising is used effectively on *Facebook*. He points out *Facebook* seems to be perceived as a great tool for building relationships and communicating directly—but not for fundraising. In fact, he says that the sharing of updates by donors has a significant impact on the amount raised by a nonprofit. The mere fact that of the 955 million monthly active users of *Facebook*, 543 million use it on their mobile and 31 million users<sup>4</sup> are active in the UK every month, allows people to put those facts in a comparable perspective. As Miller already mentioned, the fact that people share the information on their own newsfeed, makes the information more trustworthy. Allowing potential donors to donate money directly via *Facebook*, is another vital improvement for nonprofits, so users do not have to switch between a website and *Facebook*—the process is made simpler and easier accessible. In conclusion, Waddingham states that *Facebook* is the largest network and therefore ‘its scale and influence cannot be ignored’ (Waddingham, 2013, p. 191). Optimising the experience for mobile devices, an understanding of their behaviour and an experience ‘easy-to-use and above all social’ (Waddingham, 2013, pp. 190f) will be key to fundraising on *Facebook*. As Sargeant et al. (2007) pointed out—and what is underlined by Miller (2009) and Waddingham (2013)—offering information on a website is a significant point for informing potential donors. McDougle and Handy (2014) explored, how information costs influence the decision for individuals to donate. They found, that ‘individuals with higher information costs tend to rely on fewer information sources than those with lower information costs’ (McDougle and Handy, 2014, p. 12). For nonprofits, that implies, that they should be aware of individual characteristics of donors and that if nonprofits seek to raise their credibility, they have to ‘target communication efforts using the information media that these individuals are most likely to utilize’ (McDougle and Handy, 2014, p. 15). Therefore, nonprofits should

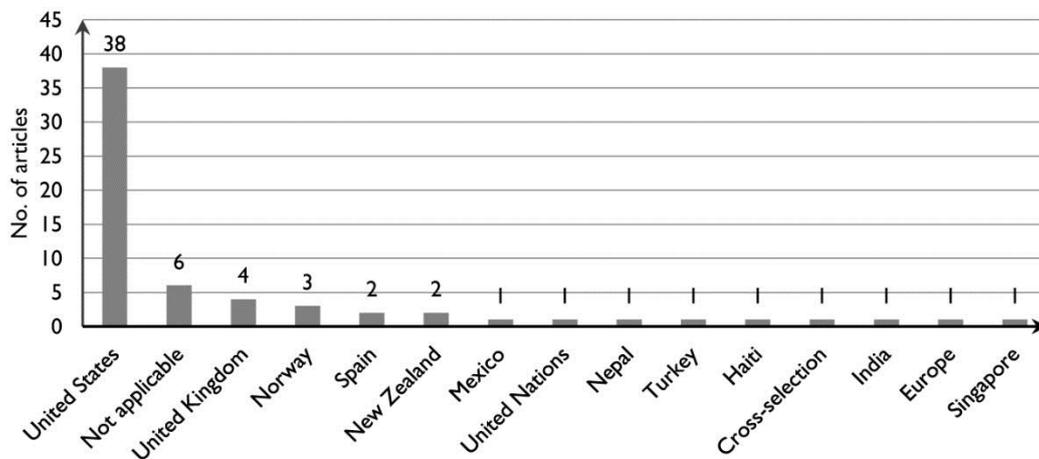
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<sup>4</sup> Those are the numbers for June 2012. The actual number might be higher.

reconsider how they use organisational information and what their target audience really need.

While the *adoption* as well as the principles of how to foster *dialogue and build relationships* have been adequately investigated, *volunteering*, or *micro-volunteering*, have hardly been explored and published. Indeed, blogs on that topics exist, but little research is conducted and adequately published in scientific journals. In addition, trends like *crowdfunding* or the emerging topic of *big data*, is not yet explored sufficiently.

**Figure 2.** Origin of sample



In terms of the sample used for the analysis, it can be noted that the majority of articles used samples from the United States, followed by studies conducted in the UK and Norway (which were conducted by only one author: Eimhjellen, 2014a; Eimhjellen *et al.*, 2013; Eimhjellen, 2014b). A cross-selection was only used once and included nonprofits from China, Turkey, and the United States (Waters and Lo (2012) *Exploring the Impact of Culture in the Social Media Sphere: A Content Analysis of Nonprofit Organizations' Use of Facebook*). More research is needed that takes country specific nonprofits and their structure into account by, for example, analysing the use of social media and ICTs of Polish, German or French nonprofits. In addition, studies could look at how nonprofits use social media to collaborate, plan or share campaign objectives.

**Table 4.** Topic in relation to social media/website mentioned

Social media/ website	Accountability	Adoption	Advocacy	Consumption	Crowdsourcing	Dialogue & Relationship	Evaluation	Giving & Fundraising	Not applicable	Volunteering	Total
Facebook		5	5	1		8		5	1	1	26
Websites	5	5	1			6	1	5			23
Twitter		5	5	1		8		1	1	1	22
YouTube			3						1		4
LinkedIn			1							1	2
Blog		2	2								4
Wikipedia			1								1

The social network mentioned most often was *Facebook*, followed by the use of websites, and then by *Twitter*. Of course, this somehow reflects the importance, prominence, and use of those platforms by their users. Nevertheless, blogs, *Wikipedia* and *YouTube* still hold potential for additional research. Moreover, newer social media platforms and services like *Instagram*, *Tumblr*, *Storify*, or *Pinterest* bear a lot of potential for nonprofits as it allows them to connect with different target groups, share information that create attention and foster engagement, e.g. pictures and charts that can be understood easily.

#### 4. Conclusions

A growing number of nonprofits, like CARE USA, the Sunlight Foundation, or Robin Hood, an organisation from New York that fights poverty on a local level, are already using social media like *Tumblr* or *Storify*—and it is unlikely that this growth will slow down in the next years. While the literature review showed that factors for the adoption can now be better explained and that the various ways of how nonprofits use social media to foster dialogue and engage people are partially demystified, it also showed that research gaps in the growing field exist. More research, for example, should be carried out in other countries than the United States. Moreover, newer methodological approaches such as social network analysis for social media should be used and the newer platforms taken into consideration. Furthermore, future research on giving should explore how individual motivation and trust in a specific

type of communication is related to giving (Mano, 2014). Regarding nonprofit advocacy, research should examine how offline and online advocacy come together (Guo and Saxton, 2014). In conclusion, the literature review illustrates that a challenging and emerging research area at the intersection of distinct disciplines exists and is emerging.

(Number of words: 3,373)

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