Social Media for Social Change? A Content Analysis of How Sport-for-Development Organizations Use Twitter

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The development of the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies (e.g., social networking sites, blogs, wikis) are becoming increasingly popular channels of communication in all sectors, including the non-governmental community. Interestingly, recent studies indicate a discrepancy between practitioners’ perceived and actual use of new technologies for facilitating two-way communication with stakeholders (McAllister-Spooner, 2009; Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009). Sport-for-development is an emerging sector within the non-governmental community. These organizations use sport as a vehicle to promote social change in communities around the world and are increasingly using social media to communicate with stakeholders. Yet, research examining sport-for-development organizations’ use of online technologies is scarce (Hayhurst, Wilson, & Frisby, 2011; Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how sport-for-development organizations use Twitter.

This study was therefore guided by existing research on how other non-governmental organizations use online technologies to communicate with stakeholders. Empirical research in communication literature suggests non-governmental agencies have failed to capitalize on the dialogic opportunities of online technologies for improving two-way communication with stakeholders (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; McAllister, 2012; Waters, Canfield, Foster, & Hardy, 2011; Waters, 2007). Lovejoy et al. found non-governmental organizations using Twitter failed to take advantage of hashtags, retweets and other creative tools available to circumvent the 140-character limitation of Twitter for engaging followers in an interactive dialogue.

For the purpose of this study, a content analysis method was chosen to examine how sport-for-development organizations use Twitter. The researchers collected data from organizations listed as finalists for the prestigious Beyond Sport Community Awards (2009-2012) and two sport-based social innovation competitions sponsored by Nike and Ashoka Changemakers: the 2007 Sport for a Better World Competition and the 2009 Women in Sport Competition. These awards were chosen since each received entries from over 350 organizations. The researchers identified 76 sport-for-development organizations as the sample for this study. To gather data, the authors visited all of the organizational websites and identified Twitter account information for 44 organizations. Twitter account information for an additional six organizations was identified through a search on Google. The organizations posted a total of 36,310 tweets and the researchers randomly selected 10% of the tweets from each organization for a total sample of 3,631 tweets. The sample size was considered adequate since Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) used a final sample of 2,437 tweets.

We modified the typology developed by Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) who examined the use of Twitter by 100 non-governmental organizations. In their study, tweets were categorized into three functions: (1) Informational—one-
way communication messages, (2) Community--messages written to engage followers in a dialogue and (3) Action--messages asking followers to support the organization by doing something. Each function originally was divided into four subcategories; however, we combined some categories and used a more parsimonious three subcategories for each function. The researchers modified the subcategories within Lovejoy and Saxton’s (2012) three functions of communication based on a review of tweets by sport-for-development organizations gathered in the data collection. The Information function consisted of (a) general program information, (b) world news and facts, and (c) retweets. The Community function was subdivided into tweets focused on (a) sports, (b) interaction, and (c) promotion of other social media platforms. The Action function consisted of messages focused on (a) promoting an event, (b) donation appeal, and (c) call for engagement.

The researchers conducted a pilot study examining 364 tweets (approximately 10% of each organization’s tweets) to examine the codebook and increase inter-rate reliability in the full data sample. All non-English tweets (n=36) were eliminated for a final sample of 328 tweets. The researchers used Cohen’s kappa statistic in SPSS 20.0 to analyze inter-rater reliability. The independent coding in the pilot study resulted in a kappa value of .813. Kappa values greater than .80 are deemed “acceptable in most situations” (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002, p. 600.) For the remaining differences, the researchers discussed their individual coding until 100% agreement was reached.

Preliminary findings from the pilot study indicate Information was the most prevalent function of communication via Twitter with 188 tweets (57%). General program information (n=92) and retweets (n=79) represented the majority of tweets in this category compared to world news and facts (n=17). Community was the second most prevalent function of communication with 109 tweets (33%). The majority of these tweets were focused on interaction (n=80) rather than promotion of other social media platforms (n=16) or sports (n=13). Action was the least prevalent function of communication with 31 tweets (10%). These messages were focused on promoting an event (n=12), donation appeal (n=11), and call for engagement (n=8).

These preliminary findings suggest sport-for-development organizations have done a better job of engaging followers in dialogue to build social capital with stakeholders compared to the nonprofits examined by Lovejoy and Saxton (2012). The sport-for-development organizations analyzed in this study were, however, less likely to encourage their followers to take action. The lack of action-oriented tweets (i.e., promoting an event, donation appeal, or call for engagement) raises concerns since sport-for-development organizations have been characterized by a lack of funding and increased competition over resources (e.g. Black, 2010; Giulianotti, 2011; Hayhurst et al., 2011; Kidd, 2008, 2011). The results of the final study will provide a better understanding of how sport-for-development organizations use Twitter for communication with stakeholders. Recommendations will then be determined to provide organizations with knowledge of how to improve communication with stakeholders since online social media can be a cost-effective tool for non-governmental organizations to overcome a lack of resources (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011).