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Conference Paper · June 2012

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Social Media Platforms for Social Good

Sabrina Bresciani

Institute for Media and Communications Management
University of St. Gallen (HSG)
St. Gallen, Switzerland
Bresciani.Sabrina@gmail.com

Andreas Schmeil

Institute for Public Communication
Università della Svizzera italiana (USI)
Lugano, Switzerland
Andreas.Schmeil@gmail.com

Abstract— The disruptive potential of social media in generating participation and networking has been readily exploited by marketers and politicians. The power of these digital networks can be used by individuals and groups for good causes, to have a positive impact on the society at large. Social media platforms are starting to be used by citizens for promoting social causes, creating community engagement to answer societal needs. Yet, precisely because social media platforms have a viral effect, they pose completely new challenges: (1) emerging from a crowded environment, (2) monitoring/managing the truthfulness of information and (3) taking into account cultural differences and preferences. Two exemplary cases of social campaigns based on social media platforms are provided - Kony 2012 and Soita Mummolle - to illustrate typical challenges and potential solutions. Future research directions are proposed.

Keywords- *Social Web, Social impact, culture, ripple effect, graphic design, Kony 2012.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Advanced ICT tools and the Internet have provided the bases for a revolution in co-creation, collaboration, participation and community engagement. This megatrend toward collaboration and sharing has been labeled Web 2.0, Social Web or social media revolution. Social media are pervasive, free, and have the potential to create disproportionate effects compared to the initial investment, through the networking and ripple effect they create for their very nature of many-to-many communication. These platforms allow organizations, movements, individuals and businesses to communicate in completely new ways, starting from the bottom rather than being imposed from the top.

These digital technologies can be used to support another “social” trend, which focuses on having a positive impact on the society, through social campaigns and movements. In the field of design, Berman published “Do good ~~design~~. How designers can change the world” [1], in which the word ‘design’ is crossed out as a call to action: “Don’t just do good design, do good” (pg. 147). Also in the field of business, and fostered by the current economic crisis, we witness the emergence of public attention on social entrepreneurship and social business [2]. In contrast with the traditional business perspective of profit maximization, social entrepreneurship offers a novel perspective, proposing that the goal of businesses is to provide a valuable service to the society while being economically self-sustainable. Numberless organizations and grassroots movements have emerged and rose, thanks to

new social technologies. This need of the society toward “social good” can now be empowered by “social media”, fostering a positive contagious effect.

Social media platforms have already been successfully used for social good, for organizing community activism, for empowering citizens, and for coordinating in emergency situations. In the case of the Haiti and China earthquakes, Twitter has been used by as a Rapid Response News Service [3]. Volunteers uploaded their information and pictures in real time, so that maps of the environment could be created, to support the coordination and the actions of the rescue teams. However social media can also be hijacked by powerful players that aim to drive away the attention of the public from specific topics, to stop the spread of information or the organization of protests [4]. It is thus crucial to understand the major challenges faced by social media platforms and potential viable solutions.

The remainder of the paper will give a brief introduction to social media for social good: it will portray two exemplary and very diverse real cases in which social media have been used for a social impact. Specific challenges will be considered focusing especially on monitoring and on the role of culture, and potential solutions are proposed. The concluding section outlines open questions and future research directions to shed light on this important topic, which is still in an emergent phase.

II. SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SOCIAL GOOD

Social technologies can empower anyone to have a positive impact on the society by creating networking effects and initiating community engagement: low (if not null) budget and few technological skills, coupled with creativity and innovation can transform a social campaign into a worldwide movement with hundreds of millions of followers. Yet, this is possible but necessarily simple.

A number of publications can be found in bookstores and online with tips for non-profit organizations to conduct fundraising with social media and to use ICT tools for good purposes [5]. But social media platforms can do much more for the common good: share computational resources (i.e., AFRICA@home project), support the organization of events, enhance cause-related communications, direct and shape human behavior, provide free educational resources or support the development of social businesses.

III. EXEMPLARY CASES

The real power of social media, compared to passive mass media, is that they can be used by any person or self-organizing group for a common goal. Collaborative environments support and facilitate the emergent engagement and participation of the crowd, which can lead to produce ‘network enriched’ solutions. Empowered users, knowing that their contribution can make a difference, are more committed and more satisfied than passive viewers. The easy and real time reproducibility of messages allowed by social technology is a completely new phenomenon in the history of human communication. Never humanity has been so interconnected. These new social technologies can create a “ripple effect”: once an idea or concept has reached a tipping point [6] it will then spread very quickly and with a chain reaction, like the ever expanding ripples across water when an object is dropped into it. Through the ripple effect, a small action can create disproportionate effect compared to original resources. Aaker and Smith [7] propose the metaphor of the dragonfly, to provide a framework for creating ripple effects for a social impact. The metaphorical dragonfly is composed by four wings, corresponding to four stages of the process: focus, grab attention, engage and take action [7].

Social digital technologies are used not only to support social causes, but also to foster collaboration, co-creation and participatory community involvement. Mayors are setting up online forums and twitter accounts to collect feedback and suggestions from citizens and understand the real needs of their population. When politicians do not take the initiative, citizens often set up discussion groups in which they voice their opinion and eventually organize actions. Social media are also used to improve products, which can likewise be considered a positive contribution to the society. Several companies are asking their customers to post their feedback and ideas for new products. For instance, Starbucks created a community with this purpose, in which users are rewarded and kept informed regarding the development of their submitted ideas [8]. Through ICT technologies, small and micro entrepreneurs can reach a global audience and sell their products directly to the buyers, thus obtaining a fairer price (see the fair trade movement [9]). Social technologies, smartly coupled with traditional media, can lead to the creation of effective campaigns “for small social enterprises, which typically have low budgets” [10: 5]. Even books are developed collaboratively: “Business Model Generation” by Osterwalder and Pigneur has been “co-created by an amazing crowd of 470 practitioners from 45 countries” [11]. When books, especially if self-published, are printed on demand they can become perpetual beta, and can be iteratively improved with the contribution of the community. These platforms can be used by social businesses to provide information-intense services for the community, for instance developing a local car sharing or baby-sitting service.

People are empowered through social technologies by connecting them and augmenting their power and thus their influence, as in the cases of the “occupy Wall Street” protests, or the Egypt revolution organized through ICT. In addition social media presence can give visibility to unknown facts, having an impact on policy-makers agenda setting, by making invisible people more visible, as in the case portrayed in the next section.

A. Kony 2012

Over one hundred million is the number of times that the ‘Kony 2012’ [12] documentary film has been viewed. The campaign set up by the NGO ‘Invisible children’ has become a viral video, and their pledge has been signed by over three and a half million people (as of April 2012). These impressive numbers have been reached with a smart use of social media platforms, in particular through videos and other visual material.

Kony 2012 is a short film (30 minutes) released in March 2012 (Fig. 1). The purpose of the video is to stop Joseph Kony, a war criminal and International Criminal Court fugitive operating in Africa, who is guilty of hundreds murders and of deploying children as soldiers. The goal of the campaign is to get Kony arrested by the end of 2012. According to the NGO, “Invisible Children uses film, creativity and social action to end the use of child soldiers in Joseph Kony’s rebel war and restore LRA-affected communities in central Africa to peace and prosperity.” (Source: <http://www.kony2012.com/>).

The campaign is primarily based on high quality video material and a website which acts as a hub for the mobilization of supporters, organization of street events, for collecting donations and keeping the supporters informed and connected. Social media used for the campaign are: website, blog, facebook page (with 87.000 likes after two months from the launch), videos on Youtube and Vimeo, Instagram (a photo sharing program now acquired by Facebook), Twitter with a number of specific hashtags (#) and clear instructions, kits to be downloaded with posters and instructions, and direct links to for contacting via email or twitter specific world leaders (Including Prime ministers and Presidents such as Obama and Cameron).



Figure 1. Promotion of the Kony2012 documentary film. (Source: <http://www.cc-chapman.com/2012/kony2012/>)

In just a few days from the launch the campaign has reached a popularity level probably unforeseen even by the organizers, with increased views on the order of millions every day. At the beginning of March when the campaign was launched, a “kit” could be purchased from the website for 30\$ with a thematic shirt, poster, bracelets, explanation booklet and other promotional material. Recently “Due to high demand, the sales of the kit have been put on hold” (Source:

<http://www.kony2012.com/>) and a downloadable kit is available with posters, door hangers, yard signs and other printable material. Initially all the material was provided only in English, and currently the film and the posters are available into about 20 languages.

In addition to the campaign, Invisible Children has developed a number of tools, as the “LRA Crisis Tracker” which is – according to the NGO – a “real-time mapping platform and data collection system created to bring an unprecedented level of transparency to the atrocities of the Lord’s Resistance Army. Using information sourced from Invisible Children’s Early Warning Radio Network, UN agencies, and local NGOs, this tool allows for better response from governments, policy-makers, and humanitarian organizations. This joint project, developed by Invisible Children and Resolve, marks the first time data surrounding the crisis has been comprehensively aggregated and made publicly available” (Source: <http://www.lracrisistracker.com/>). It is a mapping software that gathers information from multiple sources, aggregates them and make them available to the public.

In summary the Kony 2012 campaign is an impressive example of how social media can be successfully used for a social cause, reaching global awareness and mobilizing millions of people around the world. The campaign has been created and launched with social technologies and only afterwards it has hit the “offline” media by getting traditional media coverage, selling branded merchandise and organizing street actions. Yet it appears clear that Invisible Children had a relevant budget: the NGO exists since 2005, is based in San Diego and employs 43 full-time permanent staff, alongside hundreds of volunteers. In Africa, Invisible Children Uganda (ICU) employs roughly 100 local professionals. The resources of the NGO permitted to create a solid and professional social campaign which reached disproportionate resonance compared to the original means.

B. Soita Mummolle

A different use of social media for a social cause is offered by the Soita Mummolle campaign, which aims to sensitize people about the issue of seniors’ loneliness in Finland. This campaign springs from an academic project and is based on a solid theoretical background and experimentation methodology. It employed design thinking [13] and a graphic design approach and was set up with minimal resources. The aim of the project was to test how graphic design can have an ethic and a social impact, in line with the ‘do good design’ approach [1]. The project concluded that “[d]esign thinking combined with new media and good old grassroots activism seem to be a viable mix to create social impact, or at least raise awareness about relevant issues” [10:11].

The Soita Mummolle campaign was based on both online and off-line communication tools, combined in creative ways. As social media tools for the campaign, a website has been created (<http://soitamummolle.wordpress.com/> [14]), connected with a Facebook page (with over 5000 fans), Twitter and Flickr account and an online fan shop with branded merchandising.

The project has been based on an integrated use of offline “communication weapons” like street campaigns, flash-mobs (that is, is a group of people who assemble suddenly in a public place), guerrilla marketing and PR. Volunteers for the street actions and the flash-mobs have been recruited through the Facebook page. At the events, people interested in the campaign were asked to “donate their face to the cause”, by allowing the organizers to take a picture of them with the campaign logo sign, and to upload the pictures on the above mentioned social networks. In addition a creative “Knit guerrilla” (Fig. 2) has been deployed to raise awareness on the project: handmade crochets have been “forgotten” on Helsinki’s trains.

The campaign has appeared on the media over one hundred times (incl. press articles, radio programs, TV programs, Web press, etc.), and has involved over 500 participants for the street actions. For more details see [15].

According to the developers, Soita Mummolle can be considered a prototype for low-budget social campaigns; it also showed that “contemporary communication tools can empower the single citizen in being an ‘influencer’ and a ‘broadcaster’.” [10]. The project has explicitly taken into account the cultural factor, analyzing the specific needs of the elderly in the local community with a grounded study conducted before the ideation of the campaign. The needs of the elderly and the structure of family ties are probably different in diverse cultures.

Finally, the project was specifically conducted with the aim to experiment and to learn which the most effective tools are: a “failure resume” was kept “to learn as much as possible from mistakes” [10:2].



Figure 2. Soita Mummolle knit guerilla – (Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/soitamummolle/>)

IV. CHALLENGES

Good-doers are faced with three major challenges related to social media: (1) being able to *emerge* and reach a tipping point for creating a chain effect; (2) *monitor and manage* the social media platform, ensuring that the information is truthful, that spammers do not block the campaign and that multipliers do not make an incorrect use of the media; (3) address *cultural differences* and preferences for preventing cross-cultural misunderstandings and for scaling up the campaigns.

A. Emerge

Just being online does not mean that Web users will find out. Writing a blog and tweeting is not enough for getting a message across: a meaningful focused message and a strategy need to be in place. In addition, a large number of users have very low digital literacy and are not aware of how to use ICT tools properly. Millions of people, especially in developing countries, still have limited access to the Internet with slow and sporadic Internet connections.

B. Monitor and Manage

The issue of controlling is a burning topic that social media platforms are tackling with diverse approaches. Spamming, unintended usage and intentional spread of false information have been threatening the efficacy and reliability of these media. Platforms need to have mechanisms in place to monitor and swiftly act when their service is used inappropriately. ITC literacy of the users becomes crucial to educate them to assess the truthfulness of information found online and to take appropriate actions, collaborating with the platform managers by signaling potentially negative messages and suspicious actions.

When a campaign or phenomenon has reached a tipping point and has provoked a chain reaction, it is also more vulnerable to the spread of negative information, because all platforms are in place and they make it easier for users to post their comments, thus potentially starting a viral spread of criticism. The case of Kony 2012 is relevant also from this point of view: Russell, the creator and protagonist of the popular film, co-founder of Invisible Children, has been taken from the police to a local hospital because he “vandalised cars and made sexual gestures while wearing his underwear”, as published on The Guardian [16]. The news has been picked up by several online media with potential negative effects on the campaign, which are still unknown.

Online reputation can be fragile: the very nature of social media replicates rumors as swiftly as truthful information. If the organization’s online presence is not solid, it can easily be mined by false rumors, spammers and criticism. In addition users can exploit the popularity of platforms for their own needs, posting unrelated comments and links to their organizations or websites, or criticizing without real arguments.

Social media are characterized by lack of control due to their very nature of many-to-many communication platforms. For this reason several companies have been reluctant to include social media in their communication strategies. Yet customers establish groups and forums to discuss products and services, and companies have no control over these self-created communities. Ryanair for long time did not engage in any type of social media, and customers have created a number of Facebook groups with predominantly negative comments regarding the company [8]: it thus seems not possible for any organization not to take part to conversations on social media.

When grassroots initiatives are started online through the use of social media, aiming to attack powerful organizations or political parties, they can face the risk of being blocked. Powerful and ITC savvy organizations/companies can use unethical techniques to stop the spread of communications by

creating fake messages and spamming, as in the case of activists in Russia [4]. Researchers discovered a “massive Twitter spam campaign allegedly carried out by pro-Kremlin activists in Russia”, which was put in place by “flooding Twitter with a certain hashtag used by protesters” so that information could not anymore be found by the activists and hashtags become useless. Large and wealthy organizations have the resources to monitor and keep track of conversations taking place online and reacting appropriately. Conversely, small organizations with limited budget might find impossible to re-establish different campaigns or events, if attacked.

Finally, terrorists can make unintended use of information gathered on social media for their purposes. Oh, Agrawal and Rao [17] report that terrorists involved in the Mumbai attack tracked information through Twitter: “Situational information which was broadcast through live media and Twitter contributed to the terrorists’ decision making process and, as a result, increased the effectiveness of hand-held weapons to accomplish their terrorist goal”. This implies that social media platforms like Twitter can be used as participatory emergency reporting system by good-doers [3] as well as by terrorists to gather real time information.

C. Cultural Differences

Social media are considered to act on a global level by default. The aspect of cultural differences and preferences are very rarely considered: most platforms work only in English and the information provided follows an American/Western argumentation style. Although this seems logical in the perspective of the platforms creators, a large part of the world speaks other languages and has different reasoning styles [18-20]. Users from very diverse cultures like Asia, Africa and South America use social media in a different fashion than Westerners. For instance, users from collectivistic countries [21] tend to have a larger number of friends and connections, and to share more about their private life, having lesser [22] boundaries between professional and private) and less privacy concerns [23]. In addition they use different social media platforms: Facebook is not popular in China and Orkut used to be the major social network in Brasil and India (until 2010).

The effect of cultural differences on design preferences has been already demonstrated [24-25]. Culture has an impact also on argumentation styles, with Westerners favoring analytic reasoning, while East Asians preferring holistic arguments. This difference in reasoning patterns is reflected also in preferences for visual material [26].

Regarding specifically social causes, a study of an organ donation campaign in Switzerland has found that local culture and languages within Switzerland play an important role in the reception of the messages. Rational arguments were more effective for Swiss-Germans, while emotional arguments were more effective for French and Italian-speaking Swiss [27].

In conclusion cross-cultural differences can have an impact on social media platforms effectiveness at the argumentation, visual and interface level.

V. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

A. *Emerge*

The first challenge for reaching success is to get known. The goal is to reach a tipping point and thus create a ripple effect.

To reach this aim, a precise and focused goal need to be outlined, and multiple strategies should be pursued. Users who intend to exploit social media for a good cause can experiment different techniques with rapid prototyping, as seen in the Soita Mummolle case and suggested by numerous researchers supporting the design thinking approach [7; 13]. From the successful Finnish campaign it can also be learned to have a smart mix of online and offline communication channels, and to keep a “failure resume” to learn as much as possible from mistakes [10; 15]. The project started from a real need, identified through the involvement of the community. Several methods exist for collaboratively identifying needs and solutions [28]: a meaningful goal will provoke wide and positive reactions.

To reach the heart of readers the campaign should be based on stories which trigger emotions. Rational arguments can be well understood but they don't have the same power to move people to action. The Kony 2012 campaign shows how high quality visual material in terms of videos, symbols and posters can create world-wide awareness. Visualization touches emotions; it is particularly suitable to tell stories [7] and to create higher memorability than text [29]. A further application of this concept can be seen in the success reach by Kiva, a microfinance lending to entrepreneurs, especially in the developing world. The organization has reached world popularity and has been more successful than similar services offered by MicroPlace, a similar but more rational product [7: XVIII].

Thus social media platforms, in order to be successful, have to allow the users to reach visibility and set off a chain reaction: they need to be able to connect people, to integrate different media, to allow telling stories and giving emotions to the readers. Because broadband Internet access is not yet a commodity for the majority of the world population, platforms should provide access through mobile phones (which are more widespread than computers) and provide websites for slow connections.

B. *Monitor and Manage*

Organizations and individuals working for social good can harness the knowledge of crowd, but they can also fall subject of public criticism for their action. The Kony 2012 campaign has received a number of critiques regarding the goal of the project: according to an article appeared on The Guardian “Global and local charities say funds raised by Invisible Children should be spent on rehabilitation of child soldiers, not military action” and that the film “was an outdated, over-simplified version” of Uganda history [30].

Users and consumers are empowered like never before to speak up and verify the information provided. Companies, in

particular Multinational Corporation, have often been attacked by dissatisfied customers and stakeholders. The recent case of Toyota's recall of its vehicles provides an example of how social media can be managed in crisis situations. In the first few months of 2010 “Toyota's recalls related to serious safety defects totaled around 8.6 million globally” [31: 8]. Consequently “The volume of discussion in social media around Toyota was growing significantly and sentiment was trending extremely negatively” [31]. Yet Toyota was active online and on social media before the crises, and it had a dedicated team with a clear strategy. When the crisis disrupted, the company was able to quickly set up dedicated websites, newsrooms, and a social media response team, which also monitored online conversations [31]. When social media platforms are routinely used to have a conversation with customers, a crisis can be better managed and can affect to a lesser extent the overall corporate reputation. Existing platforms can be used to provide information and answering customer's burning questions. Similarly, Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin group, uses Twitter to apologize publicly in case of disservice (i.e., [32]). Yet, a large budget is often necessary to have a timely and consistent response to crisis situations.

The learning points for individuals and organizations aiming to use social media for social good are to share only truthful and reliable information. If the content is not genuine, readers will find out and backfire. Transparency should be a priority, and ideally, there should be monitoring system to track information posted on the web regarding the organization, for instance through alerts and analytics.

Social media platforms should provide systems for automatically checking and mapping attacks, and take appropriate actions. They should also offer reporting systems to users for indicating spammers and non-ethical users who, for example, use social media conversations to post personal links and unrelated information. Platforms should also take an active role in educating their users and readers to always check the truthfulness of information they read and endorse. However this is not the sole responsibility of the platforms: appropriate ICT literacy should be introduced in schools.

C. *Cultural Differences*

The two cases analyzed take a very different approach regarding the inclusion of cultural preferences. The Kony 2012 campaign is developed with a global target and a typically American argumentation style, by portraying the enemy, an over-simplified accounting of the context, the hope for the future and a short-term call to action for solving the problem. The campaign has then expanded globally by translating the videos and posters content into several languages. We can also notice a strong use of visual material, which is particularly suitable both to trigger emotions and to overcome language barriers.

In contrast, the Soita Mummolle campaign has been developed starting from an analysis of local needs and requirements, which are context-specific. The local language has been used for the all the graphic design material involved.

If the same strategy could work in a different cultural context is a matter of future research [10].

Platforms should allow users to manage multiple languages and styles and to coordinate global with localized information and actions, for instance giving an option to publish content only on a specific local account or simultaneously on all accounts globally.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Social media platforms offer unprecedented potential for individuals and groups to collaborate toward initiatives for a positive social impact. Two real cases have been discussed to illustrate widely different approaches, and the positive and negative aspects they faced. Three main challenges have been identified.

Although a much has been written on how to emerge in a crowded media environment, much less information is available on how to manage contributions from large crowds, and even less on the effect of cultural on social media use. Given the recency of the phenomenon, many questions remain open to investigation. The potential disadvantages of these platforms should be investigated more in depth, with the aim of finding effective solutions, such as automatic monitoring systems and reporting structures.

Social media are global by default, and typically only language issues are taken into account – if any cultural aspect is considered. Yet there is evidence of differences in reasoning patterns and argumentation preferences across cultures. Globalizing social media interface and content could increase their effectiveness, however increasing costs.

The power of social media promises to be massive thus research should continue to investigate how to channel this potential toward positive social outcomes.

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