

Learning through Social Media: How a Nonprofit's Use of Facebook and Twitter Turned into Research

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During my freshman year of college I enrolled in a service learning-based, first-year writing course. All first-years at my university, The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., are required to take this course. The program, called University Writing (UW), focuses on teaching students how to write academic research papers to prepare them for their futures in academic learning. Each UW has its own topic about which the students write; however, the format for the classes is similar across the different sections.

My UW professor, Dr. Phyllis Ryder, is a published scholar in her field of study—academic writing about service learning, specifically how service can be used to teach students writing skills and where exactly writing and service intersect. Her UW course, titled *Writing for Social Change: Writing with DC Community Organizations*, teaches students how to conduct research and present their findings in conjunction with volunteering at a local community organization. At the beginning of the course students select an organization with which to work; they then begin volunteering while at the same time beginning to learn how to write academically.

I decided to work with an environmental nonprofit called Groundwork Anacostia River, DC (GWARDC) for the duration of the semester. Groundwork focuses on environmental education and recreation for high school students in the D.C. area, specifically in Ward 7. Students are usually involved with Groundwork for a year or two. The Executive Director and Volunteer and Events Coordinator construct a curriculum each semester that they then teach the students each week. Their goal is to teach the students about the environmental problems facing their communities as well as how to combat those problems. Once the students complete the academic portion of each module, they go out into the communities and practice what they learned. This can be anything from cleaning out a litter trap in the Anacostia River, to creating a vegetable garden at one of the schools. While at Groundwork, I worked in an office setting, coordinating volunteers and helping to create the curriculum. I was also in charge of the social media accounts of the organization.

When the time came for us to write our research papers, we were instructed to find a topic to research that was interesting to us and that was also applicable to our community organization. The research topic selected did not need to affect or influence the organization or its work in any way; however, it was required that there was some connection between the two. At that point I had worked with Groundwork for about a month, and had recently begun work on its social media accounts. The Volunteer Coordinator asked me to “revamp” the Twitter account and Facebook page for the organization; however, I did not know how to go about doing that since I wasn’t sure exactly where the problems were. It was clear to both of us that the accounts needed reforming; however, the next steps in how to do that were unclear.

I wanted to help Groundwork move forward in any way that I could. When told I needed to choose my research paper topic, I decided almost immediately to focus on social media and whether it was an effective method of communicating information. As I began the research process and realized that there was more literature on the subject than I had initially anticipated, I narrowed my focus to just Facebook and Twitter. I wanted to know if Groundwork was using its

Facebook and Twitter accounts in the most efficient way to communicate with its audience members and to spark interaction with them.

Fairly early on into my research process I discovered Kristen Lovejoy and Gregory Saxton's research, which became essential to my research and paper. Lovejoy and Saxton are professors in New York whose research focuses specifically on the use of social media by nonprofit organizations. They created a framework to use when analyzing an organization's social media that can help determine whether or not the social media platforms are being used as effectively as possible. They based the design of the framework on Twitter; however, in my research I also applied it to Facebook. Lovejoy and Saxton's framework lays out three types of tweets that an organization can use. Each type of tweet is associated with a level of interaction that the organization is engaging its audience in by posting that tweet.

The first level is *Information*, which is the most basic type of tweet and the organization interacts with its audience the least by using this type of post. An organization will send out *Information* posts to communicate some sort of information with its audience. These often describe the details of the organization's work and provide updates on progress it is making with projects. This type of post does not engage the audience and doesn't lead to any type of conversation between the organization and the people with whom it is communicating.

Community is the second level of tweet an organization can post as a way of communicating with its audience. *Community* posts will engage the audience in a way that requires little effort on the part of the participants. Some examples of this type of post are asking followers to sign an online petition that the organization is related to, or asking them to watch videos and make comments or suggestions afterwards. This is an important step in the organization's communication process with its audience because it initiates the audience to take physical action.

The final type of tweet in the framework is *Action*. These tweets are a sort of call to those that follow the organization to come and actively take part in working towards its cause. *Action* tweets almost always ask followers to participate at a particular event, usually some sort of volunteering day or activity with the organization. Followers have the option to make a personal connection with organization members and speak with them about the work being done in the organization's day-to-day practices. These tweets are the highest level of engagement the organization can partake in on a social media platform with its audience.

One of the key elements of Lovejoy and Saxton's framework is that they explain *how* to use these different types of tweets, not just what they are. When used incorrectly, the three types of tweets are not as effective as they are when used properly. Lovejoy and Saxton explain that all three types of tweets must be used, and in a varying order. An organization should not post one type of tweet a few times in a row, then another type, then another type. The framework does not work best when used strictly in the *Information*, *Community*, *Action* order. Instead, tweets should be posted in no particular order. The three types of tweets engage audience members at differing levels of involvement with the organization. An audience member who is just beginning to learn about the organization will need to see a few *Information* posts while deciding if he/she wants to become more involved or not. However, someone that has worked with the organization for a few years will be more inclined towards *Action* posts, as those outline how the participant could be more involved. Since the three types of tweets target different audience members, it is essential for an organization to use all three types regularly. Otherwise, it will only target a few members of its follower base rather than as many as possible.

When I conducted my research, I found that Groundwork's Twitter account was being used correctly according to the framework, but its Facebook account was not. It was posting almost exclusively *Information* posts that were not engaging its audience at all. I met with the Executive Director and Volunteer Coordinator of Groundwork and explained this to them, while laying out a potential course of action for how to change Groundwork's social media habits to make them more effective.

Combining my service at Groundwork with my research paper made me much more inclined to complete the research and find a solution to the organization's social media problems. Since I had an active stake in the organization I was researching, I was even more driven to find the answers I wanted because I knew that they would be directly benefitting Groundwork. I realized that by performing this research and finding a way for the organization to interact with its audience more effectively, I had performed a service that otherwise it would not have received.

Going to Groundwork each week while I completed my research and updating the organization on the progress I was making fueled my passion for completing the project even more. The Volunteer Coordinator and I began to make some adjustments to the social media websites while I was still completing the research. I was able to see the changes made in real-time and how the application of the framework really affected the levels of engagement received from its followers. This was a crucial step in the process as it showed me that the work I was doing was important and was directly impacting the difference Groundwork was making in its community.

Groundwork's Twitter use has continued to improve almost a year after I proposed my changes. It posts even more frequently and is adjusting the types of posts in the way suggested by the Lovejoy and Saxton framework. There is increased engagement from the community through retweets and favorites as well. Its Facebook use has also changed and improved. It is engaging its followers more, by creating events for people to RSVP to as well as posting links to websites people can visit to get involved and donate to the organization. Groundwork is also posting different things on its Facebook and Twitter pages, which was a change I proposed when I presented my research.

Groundwork is clearly evolving its use of social media tools to work in its favor. It seemed that at the beginning of its Twitter and Facebook use, Groundwork had accounts on these websites because all other nonprofits like it did and in order to be competitive and current it needed to have them as well. Now, it seems that it is moving to the next step of social media use; it is beginning to use these platforms to create a space for engagement and evolution of its organization.

Before beginning this research for Groundwork I used all social media platforms for enjoyment. While I knew that these platforms – Twitter especially – are used for activism, I didn't realize that this activism could take place at different levels of platform engagement. I use Twitter minimally, checking it once or twice a day and rarely posting or actively engaging. I believed that the only times Twitter and Facebook could be used for activism were during rare occasions, such as the Arab Spring or inner-city riots and protests. In reality, social media platforms can be used for activism every day in various circumstances. They can be used for bigger movements involving more people, but they can also be used to inspire and engage members of the local community to rally behind a cause, as they do with Groundwork.

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References

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