

2015

# A New Model to Explore Non-Profit Social Media Use for Advocacy and Civic Engagement

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## Repository Citation

Chapman, David; Miller-Stevens, Katrina; Morris, John C.; and O'Hallarn, Brendan, "A New Model to Explore Non-Profit Social Media Use for Advocacy and Civic Engagement" (2015). *School of Public Service Faculty Publications*. 21.

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## Original Publication Citation

Chapman, D., Miller-Stevens, K., Morris, J. C., & O'Hallarn, B. (2015). A new model to explore non-profit social media use for advocacy and civic engagement. *First Monday*, 20(10), 1-20. doi: 10.5210/fm.v20i10.5912

# A new model to explore non-profit social media use for advocacy and civic engagement

by David Chapman, Katrina Miller-Stevens,  
John C Morris, and Brendan O'Hallarn

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## Abstract

Non-profit organizations are actively using social media platforms as a way to deliver information to end users, yet little is known of the internal processes these organizations follow to implement this tool. We present a case study of one non-profit organization, Blue Star Families, Inc., that is actively engaged in advocacy and civic engagement. We offer a new model to explore non-profit organizations' use of social media platforms by building on previous models and frameworks developed to explore the use of social media in the public, private, and non-profit sectors.

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## Introduction

In an age when electronic communication is ubiquitous, non-profit organizations are actively using social media platforms as a way to deliver information to end users. In spite of the broad use of these platforms, little scholarship has focused on the internal processes these organizations employ to implement these tools. A limited number of studies offer models to help explain an organization's use of social media from initiation to outcomes, yet few studies address a non-profit organization's mission as the driver to employ social media strategies and tactics. Furthermore, the effectiveness of social media use is difficult for non-profit organizations to measure. Studies that attempt to address this question have done so by viewing social media platform analytics (*e.g.*, Facebook analytics) or analyzing written content by users of social media (Nah and Saxton, 2013; Auger, 2013; Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip, 2014; or Guo and Saxton, 2014). The value added of this study is to present a model for practice (Weil, 1997) that explores social media use and its challenges from a non-profit organization's mission through its desired outcome, in this case an outcome of advocacy and civic engagement.

We focus on one non-profit organization, Blue Star Families, that actively engages in advocacy and civic engagement. Blue Star Families was formed in 2009 to "raise the awareness of the challenges of military family life with our civilian communities and leaders" (Blue Star Families, 2010). Blue Star Families is a virtual organization with no physical office location. Thus, the organization relies on its Web presence and

social media tools to advocate for military families and engage service members and their families, communities, and citizens in civic engagement activities (Blue Star Families, 2010).

The study aims to provide organizational-level insights of the successes and challenges of working in the social media environment. Specifically, the study asks: What are the processes non-profit organizations follow to link organizational mission to outcomes when using social media platforms? What are the successes and challenges of using social media platforms for advocacy and civic engagement purposes? In our effort to answer these questions, we present a new model to explore non-profit organizations' use of social media platforms by building on previous models and frameworks developed to explore the use of social media in the public, private, and non-profit sectors.

This research is important for three reasons. First, most previous studies of social media tend to employ models that focus on the satisfaction of the social media tools for organizational members, rather than the utility of social media as a tool to meet organizational goals. Our research offers a means to explore the utility of social media from an organization perspective. Second, the exemplar case for our research, Blue Star Families, Inc., is a non-profit organization whose mission is to create and nurture a virtual community spread over a large geographical — if not global — area. Because Blue Star Families was founded as an online organization that could not exist without social media, it provides a case for which social media is a critical component of the organization's activity. Finally, we offer some "lessons learned" from our case to identify issues for other organizations seeking to create a significant social media presence.

This paper is organized as follows: first, the growth of social media is briefly addressed to provide background context. Second, previous models and frameworks exploring social media are discussed. This is followed by a presentation of a new model exploring the use of social media from an organizational perspective, starting with the driver of a non-profit organization's mission, to its desired outcomes of advocacy and civic engagement. Third, the case study methodology is explained. Next, we present an analysis and discussion applying the new model to Blue Star Families' use of social media platforms. We conclude by discussing the challenges of social media revealed in the case study analysis, and we offer recommendations to address these challenges.



## Growth of social media

Evolving from an imagined world that societies are best seen as networks rather than rigid groups (Craven and Wellman, 1973), a process made possible through the growth of computer networks (Hiltz and Turoff, 1993), the field of social networking systems (SNS) has grown and evolved dramatically in the past two decades. Today it pervades diverse facets of everyday lives, from being a tool to connect and interact with family, friends and colleagues (Ellison, *et al.*, 2007), to an indispensable public relations and marketing tool (Funk, 2013; Meyerson, 2010), to collapsing the traditional boundaries of public and private (Papacharissi, 2012), to online organizing from school projects (Lampe, *et al.*, 2011), to multi-player video games (Skoric and Kwan, 2011), and to significant social movements such as Occupy (Wittkower, 2012) and the Arab Spring (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011; Fahmi, 2009; Khondker, 2011).

Throughout the 1990s and early twenty-first century, social media spread in popularity and growth, as users gravitated to SNS sites such as SixDegrees.com in 1997, Friendster in 2002, and MySpace in 2003 (Tiedje, 2011). However, the true impact of social media on society and organizations was not felt completely until two social media sites — Facebook and Twitter — exploded in popularity (Marinucci, 2010; Murthy, 2013). Facebook is an SNS used primarily to connect, interact, and stay in touch with contacts that the user knows personally. The company, developed in a Harvard dorm room by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, has 1.2 billion users, and has been valued at more than US\$130 billion, making it the largest, most successful SNS ever (Rushe, 2014). Twitter is an SNS created for users to share their thoughts in short, 140-character posts known as "tweets," sharing information directly, either publicly or privately, with other Twitter users. There are more than 500 million Twitter users, sending more than 340 million tweets every day (Thomases, 2010).

Given the immense and growing popularity of the two SNS applications, there is a rapidly growing body of scholarship about social media, and research focuses largely on the twin giants Facebook and Twitter. A considerable thrust of that research is in their utility for organizations in the public and non-profit sectors as

a networking, marketing, and engagement tool. In one study, Harris, *et al.* (2013) examined the adoption of SNS use by local health departments (LHDs), finding that social media has the potential to aid LHDs in disseminating public health information. A survey of users of social networking sites during the 2008 Presidential election campaign found that SNS sites encouraged civic participation, but didn't necessarily affect participation in the political process, or change respondents' views about trust in government (Zhang, *et al.*, 2009).

If social media is a relatively new field, the field of evaluation of social media efforts is even newer. In a study of social media efforts of the charitable Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Gibbons [1] asked, "What exactly do we expect out of social media and how do we know social media will achieve something better?" Even asking these questions put that Foundation ahead of many organizations in evaluating their social media efforts. A survey of 5,000 professionals commissioned by the Minnesota Council of Non-profits found that, though nearly 60 percent of individuals felt social media was providing a strong return on investment, only 32 percent have goals and objectives for their social media campaigns and only 35.9 percent do any type of tracking of the impact of their social media efforts (Cici, 2011). One alternative to tracking the impact of social media efforts has been the development of models and frameworks to explain social media use by organizations.

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## Models and frameworks to explore use of social media

Social media provides non-traditional information technology capabilities at no- or low-cost; the benefit to non-profits is that they may not have the requisite staff, expertise, or resources to populate an information technology office. The online social media software is generally provided on an as-is basis with some ability for analysis, albeit in a very basic form. Thus, the question of determining if a framework or model fits a real-world situation is complicated by a possible lack of comprehensive metrics that demonstrate a marginal or even nominal return on investment or other less tangible constructs.

Within possible high-to-low levels of engagement and participation, a primary issue is whether simple interactions (*i.e.*, social media "Likes" and "Follows") lead to progressive levels of participation via the Reader-to-Leader framework (Preece and Shneiderman, 2009), which implies a sequence of steps from Reader-to-Contributor-to-Collaborator-to-Leader [2]. In this model, the user of the Web site reads information presented by an organization, and after some time the user may start to contribute to that Web site through activities such as uploading a photo or posting a short note. This interaction soon moves to the collaborator stage where the user works with others to create new material to post on the Web site such as articles or videos, and ultimately these transactions result in the user taking on a leadership role on the site. Although customer engagement cycles are typically oriented towards the business sector, it may lend itself to adaptation in volunteer and organizational engagement efforts within the non-profit sector.

Although we are solely addressing non-profits in the current research, those organizations have some parallelism with government and, possibly, service-oriented business organizations. Thus, studies that look at government may have some applicability to the non-profit sector. For example, Mergel and Bretschneider (2013) suggest a three-stage adoption process for government social media use; this includes "intrapreneurship" and experimentation, constructive chaos, and, finally, institutionalization. In this model, intrapreneurs, or employees known as change agents, seek to implement social media tools as part of the work environment within the organization [3]. To determine what tools will work best for the organization, periods of experimentation and constructive chaos must be endured. Once the employees have determined the most effective social media tool for the organization, the tool is institutionalized as part of the organization's daily operations with rules and procedures to standardize use of the social media tool across the organization [4].

Consequently, the question would be how far an organization has gone in establishing a presence, delivering their message, and providing their defined services. In their explanation of previous models of e-government, Coursey and Morris (2008) described levels of presence that ranged from an emerging presence to interactivity (two-way communication) to transactional to citizen participation in governance [5]; their results [6] indicated that this is not a necessarily linear process and is an add-on to existing efforts. This is somewhat comparable with what we might expect to see in sectors that are similar to government. We posit that small or moderately sized non-profits may not be much out of the emerging

presence stage or basic transaction stage, primarily due to their mission, funding, or both. However, Nah and Saxton (2013) noted that size of the non-profit organization was not a factor in the implementation of social media.

We approach this research and case from the perspective of a multi-tiered framework. Nah and Saxton (2013) have suggested an adoption and use model for non-profit organizations; their study showed a number of factors that implicate presence and frequency of social media usage, including program service revenues, Web reach, governance, and donors. However, the aforementioned study was limited to the basics of adoption and not to volunteerism or general public engagement. While considering the non-profit sphere, we have modified Sashi's (2012) business sector oriented customer engagement cycle and applied it to the non-profit context. As Sashi's model suggests, the ultimate driver for a private sector business to engage in social media activity is to establish connections between the seller and the customer. In Sashi's model, sellers create online communities to interact with the customers (the interaction stage) [7]. If these interactions are positive, the customer will be satisfied (the satisfaction stage) with the seller and will continue to engage with that seller on the social media platform (the retention stage) [8]. Over time, trust and reciprocity develop between the seller and the customer via the social media platform, and a commitment develops where the customer will not choose another seller [9]. Satisfied customers will then share their experiences with friends and acquaintances (the advocacy stage), and the customer may have a strong emotional bond with the seller (the engagement stage) [10]. The sequencing of these stages is cyclical and can be viewed as: Connection → Interaction → Satisfaction → Retention → Commitment → Advocacy → Engagement → Connection [11]. Sashi's model has been altered in this study for the sectoral differences to focus on organizational mission as the initiator of a social media presence.



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### **A new model**

Given previous literature, our model (Table 1) is a modification of Sashi (2012) while considering the findings of the models noted above. The interests within this research are the outputs of advocacy and civic engagement, with the implication that these items may be independent or interdependent.

| Table 1: Social media progression model and components. |   |
|---|---|
| Model hierarchy   | Components  |
| <i>Organizational mission</i>                           | Goals (implicit and explicit)<br>Purpose (implicit and explicit)  |
| <i>Social media presence</i>                            | Implementation of social media by the organization<br>Initiate engagement   |
| <i>Reach</i>  | Continued implementation and enhancements within social media<br>Increased levels of engagement (users and participation)             |
| <i>Interaction &amp; usage</i>                          | Monitoring of social media user base<br>Improvement in understanding user base<br>Iteratively improve services                        |
| <i>Satisfaction</i>                                     | Goals and needs met by users and non-profit   |
| <i>Advocacy &amp; civic engagement</i>                  | Serve users by obtaining funding or influencing policy bodies and supply partners<br>Enhance efforts to complete organizational goals |

In our model, *Organizational mission* reflects the explicit and, perhaps, implicit goals and purposes of the non-profit. Although part of the larger organizational effort, this is expected to drive *Social media presence*, either passively or evangelically. *Social media presence* would be the implementation of accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and any other popular social media tools in order to initiate organizational engagement with their target audience. Proper implementation of an online presence would be intended to lead to higher levels of multiplicative end-user engagement, thereby increasing *Reach*. Unlike what was suggested by Nah and Saxton (2013), this study posits that *Reach* is independent of Web sites, where a more modern interpretation is that the Web 2.0 obviates the difference in environment and the application is dominant. Given accumulating levels of mass, *Interaction & usage* should follow; the organization would be provided —

via monitoring social media platform(s) — an improved understanding of its user base and adapt its services accordingly (Sashi, 2012). The adaptation facilitated by *Interaction & usage* is expected to lead to *Satisfaction*, where both parties will continue their connection and interaction (Sashi, 2012).

The inputs of the model will strengthen the efforts of the organization. While *Advocacy* may be seen as end-user promotion of the organization (Sashi, 2012), the modified non-profit sector view is similar in that the multi-coupled progressions through the model will solidify the non-profit's intentions for serving its base to funding or policy bodies and supply partners. *Civic engagement* is an additional part of this positive, incremental flow and the non-profit's social media efforts will enhance efforts to complete its organizational goals.

The following examination of Blue Star Families will consider the non-profit's adoption of social media, the seeming success of its engagement and reach, and the progression beyond "brochureware." As indicated elsewhere, Blue Star Families has significant contact with its base via social media and is a virtual organization with no walk-in facilities. Using the proffered model, we consider how well Blue Star Families is accomplishing their advocacy and civic engagement goals.



## Methodology

In order to gain in-depth knowledge of Blue Star Families' successes and challenges of its social media activities, a single case-study design has been chosen. Case studies provide a platform to explore specific details that are often overlooked by quantitative studies, and they help researchers explore conceptual validity by identifying and measuring the indicators that represent the theoretical concepts the researcher intends to measure [12]. While the use of one case study may be considered a limitation, Yin (2003) argues case studies are not intended for purposes of generalizability, but rather they are necessary for theoretical development within a specific context.

The organization chosen for this study is Blue Star Families ([bluestarfam.org](http://bluestarfam.org)), a small 501(c)(3) non-profit organization started in 2009 with a mission to support, connect, and empower military families (Blue Star Families, 2014a). Blue Star Families is a virtual organization with no home walk-in office. The organization's seven full-time paid staff work from their personal computers in their own homes spread throughout the United States. Full-time staff include an executive team (chief executive officer, an executive director, and a managing director), and directors for communications, membership, programming, and research and policy. For its limited on-the-ground activities, the organization relies on volunteers that run the local virtual chapters of the organization. Blue Star Families has 45 state chapters, most of which are located in the United States with six chapters located outside of the U.S. in countries with significant concentrations of active-duty military. It is important to note that staff members run the organization almost exclusively through online communications (social media and e-mail) and occasional conference calls.

According to the 2012 IRS Form 990, Blue Star Families reported total revenues of approximately US\$1,530,000. Nearly 100 percent of revenues reported on the Form 990 Part VIII for 2012 came from contributions, gifts, and grants. Membership fees and fundraising events were not reported. Expenses during this period totaled approximately US\$1,400,000. The three largest areas of program expenses included ~US\$535,000 spent on morale programs (providing books, museum admissions, discounted tickets, and other functions), ~US\$351,000 on research and policy (research and advocacy of issues that affect military families), and ~US\$252,000 on membership and chapters to facilitate activities in local chapters run by volunteers.

Blue Star Families' activities are centered on the use of social media as a means to attract, inform, retain, and interact with its membership. The organization creates online national and international communities that serve as a bridge between military families, civilians, and service organizations (Blue Star Families, 2014b). The organization has no physical office or flagship location, and outside of its limited on-the-ground activities through the local chapters and interactions with federal agencies, the organization exists primarily online. This virtual existence is possible because of the organization's Web site and social media outlets. If the Blue Star Families' Web site and social media platforms were to dissipate, the organization would no longer exist. This fact sets Blue Star Families apart from other non-profit organizations with national and international memberships in that Blue Star Families was founded on the premise that both its staff and

member communications would be through virtual connections (e-mail and social media). Blue Star Families' social media activities are not an outgrowth of an already established organization; rather, the organization was founded because of social media.

Blue Star Families reports that it has 80,000 members worldwide. Along with its Web site, the organization is present on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google +, Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram, and Flickr. In 2012, Blue Star Families' *Annual report* noted the organization's Web site had 325,000 views, its Facebook and Twitter pages have 25,000 followers combined. Since Blue Star Families is a somewhat new organization and designed explicitly to integrate social media into its processes and activities, the organization provides an excellent case to explore the use of social media in the non-profit sector.

The data sources for this study include five interviews with executive-level employees who work on social media aspects of the organization, and a review of Blue Star Families' online social media tools. Telephone semi-structured interviews were conducted in March through April of 2014, and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes each. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis by three individuals to ensure inter-coder reliability. The interviewees were asked questions regarding Blue Star Families' social media tools, the perceived effectiveness of these platforms and social media activities, and the successes and challenges the organization has encountered using social media.

Qualitative data from the Web site contents and interview transcripts were analyzed using template analysis (King, 2004). "The essence of template analysis is that the researcher produces a list of codes (templates) representing themes identified in their textual data. Some of these will usually be defined a priori, but they will be modified and added to as the researcher reads and interprets the texts" [13]. Template analysis assumes there are many different interpretations of any phenomenon, and the richness of the information produced from different perspectives should be emphasized in the write-up of the results (King, 2004). Using this method, an initial template of codes is created from pre-existing themes or issues identified from the research questions and supporting literature. The codes are organized with groups of similar concepts. Once the initial template is created, the codes are systematically applied to each interview, and additional coding themes are identified as the analysis continues. When new codes are identified, interview transcripts must be re-read in order to identify the new themes in the codebook (King, 2004).

Quantitative data was collected using Web site analytics including LikeAlyzer for Facebook (Meltwater Group, 2013), Twitonomy (Diginomy, 2014) and twtrland (twtrland, n.d.) for Twitter. Web site analytics provide useful descriptive statistics that illustrate the membership's support of Blue Star Families and the membership's use of its social media tools.

The limitations of this study should be noted. First, since Blue Star Families is a relatively new organization with only seven full-time staff members, the opportunities for staff interviews are limited. Second, the small staff size also creates resource problems when measuring the effectiveness of the organization's social media tools. Blue Star Families does not employ a full-time technology specialist and it does not pay for services that track social media effectiveness. Rather, the organization utilizes free metric tools offered by host sites that are known to regularly change their algorithms (*i.e.*, Facebook Analytics). Third, the organization does not use a precise system to track its total membership in that some members are double-counted. Finally, the study did not gather data from users or volunteers of the Blue Star Families' Web site or social media tools. In future research, information from the membership of Blue Star Families will be useful in determining the impact of the organization.

The above limitations make the effectiveness and reach of the organization somewhat difficult to assess, yet the interview data and Web site analytics collected for this study are sufficient to illustrate the new model we propose to explore non-profit social media use for advocacy and civic engagement. However, we suggest future research using this model should incorporate interviews from the organization's volunteers and membership and additional Web site analytics.



## Analysis and discussion

To illustrate the successes and challenges of Blue Star Families' social media efforts, the activities of this organization are explained through the proposed model presented earlier. Through this model, we present a



process to explore the link between organizational mission and desired outcomes of non-profit organizations' use of social media. Our goal is to provide an exemplar case through which to examine the veracity of our model, and to determine potential issues for non-profit organizations wishing to employ social media as a central component of their organizational activity.

### *Organizational mission*

As noted in the preceding section, the mission of Blue Star Families is to support, connect, and empower military families (Blue Star Families, 2014a). The connections Blue Star Families seek are not only between members of the military community, but also between the military community and the civilian population. This presents problems of both space and time. First, the U.S. military maintains a presence in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, all U.S. possessions and territories, and dozens of nations around the globe. The challenge of creating and maintaining a vibrant and relevant organization when its members are geographically dispersed is significant. In order to "support, connect, and empower" its members, those members must feel as though they are truly part of a larger entity, and they must perceive benefit from that entity. Second, the fact that the organization's members are so geographically dispersed means that interactions are likely to take place between members in very different time zones.

An organization such as Blue Star Families could not exist but for social media. The three elements present in the organizational mission (support, connect, empower) are all enhanced through the formation of a vibrant and robust sense of community through virtual connections. Social media provides the pathways for communication that allow for interaction nearly in real time, regardless of geographic location or time zone. Moreover, the same communication modes also offer the same benefits that allow the military community to interact with the civilian community. Given the nature of its clientele, Blue Star Families could not meet its mission without the use of social media. Social media allows the formation of virtual communities that transcend both space and time.

### *Social media presence*

Blue Star Families employs a variety of social media tools in its arsenal. One of the primary tools is Facebook, the initial means of communication (Interview A, personal communication, 2 April 2014). Blue Star Families maintains a central Facebook page with over 46,000 likes (Blue Star Families, 2014b), as well as about 45 state chapter pages and three pages dedicated to specific subgroups of members (entrepreneurs, educators, and health care professionals) (Interview A, personal communication, 2 April 2014). These pages allow members to read information, share posts, and engage one another through both posts and Facebook messaging.

In addition, Blue Star Families maintains an active Twitter account; the Twitter feed currently has about 17,000 followers (Blue Star Families, 2014c). The organization also maintains an active social media presence through Instagram, LinkedIn, Flickr, Pinterest, and Google Plus (Interview B, personal communication, 2 April 2014; Interview C, personal communication, 2 April 2014). Membership and access are unrestricted, and many members engage across multiple platforms (Interview D, personal communication, 4 April 2014).

### *Reach*

As noted earlier, the primary mission of Blue Star Families is to create a virtual community comprised of military families, military members, and interested civilians. The organization currently counts about 80,000 members, although this number is somewhat misleading; respondents report that the total membership figure represents the sum total of identified users on all platforms, yet many members are users on multiple platforms (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014). The membership represents all military services and ranks, active duty and retired, and reserves. As such, it is one of the few organizations that cuts across traditional divisions within the military community (Interview C, personal communication, 2 April 2014).

Formal membership is achieved when a person provides an e-mail address on the organization's Web site (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014). There are no membership fees (Blue Star Families, 2014d), and membership is open to anyone (whether directly connected to the military community or not). The current membership is located throughout the United States and around the world, and most members are located in the continental United States. There are roughly 39 state chapters located throughout the U.S. While most members are people with a direct connection to the military, the organization is trying to

reach out to civilian populations as well (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014). The bulk of the membership consists of military spouses and children of service members (Interview C, personal communication, 2 April 2014), although the organization also seeks to include girlfriends and boyfriends of service members, along with widows and parents (groups traditionally excluded from the military support structure) (Interview C, personal communication, 2 April 2014).

### *Interaction and usage*

Blue Star Families applies social media in two different spheres. First, social media is the primary means through which the organization connects with its membership. As noted earlier, Blue Star Families employs a range of social media tools to interact with its membership, including Facebook, Twitter, and others. An important element of these tools is that they are largely interactive, and thus allow members to interact with one another in conversations with multiple participants (including the organization). One of the few non-interactive tools employed by Blue Star Families is the twice-monthly e-mail newsletter produced by Blue Star Families and distributed via the organization's e-mail list (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014). The newsletter is largely a one-way communication tool between the organization and its individual members.

Blue Star Families also maintains specialized Facebook pages for specific subgroups of members (Interview D, personal communication, 4 April 2014). These pages focus on entrepreneurs, educators, and health care professionals respectively, and offer members to connect with others in their profession. The pages are used to provide professional support, list job openings, and develop a sense of community among the members (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014).

Other examples of interaction include the willingness of Blue Star Families to cross-post information with other groups. The information is carefully vetted by Blue Star Families' staff (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014), and efforts are made to ensure that the nature of the shared information does not morph into an endorsement of these points of view. Our interview respondents were careful to point out that while they often post information provided by the U.S. Department of Defense or the White House, for example, they are careful to make clear the organization does not endorse any particular point of view. Respondents noted that they do not post all information they are asked to post, and Blue Star Families also declines to post any information with a payment attached (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014).

A second form of interaction and usage of social media is that found within the organization itself. As a virtual organization with staff located in geographically distant locations, the Blue Star Families leadership has adopted social media as a primary form of internal communication as well. As one respondent noted, "we actually communicate through Facebook messaging quite often just because we're already on it" (Interview C, personal communication, 2 April 2014). The staff also uses e-mail, instant messaging, and conference calls to communicate with one another.

### *Satisfaction*

Generally speaking, the interviewees are satisfied with the social media tools they use. Most respondents noted that, as a virtual organization, Blue Star Families could not exist as an effective organization without social media — social media makes Blue Star Families possible.

The organization uses a range of metrics to assess and gauge their success. Most of the metrics employed are those available internally within the different media platforms (Interview A, personal communication, 2 April 2014), such as the number of "likes" or re-posts (Interview B, personal communication, 2 April 2014) on Facebook or the number of re-tweets on Twitter. While other (perhaps more accurate or insightful) metrics are available, the organization has neither the personnel nor the allocated funds available to employ these metrics. This factor does limit the organization's ability to understand a great deal about their reach and demographic penetration. In addition, the internal metrics change often (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014), which presents a constant learning curve for staff charged with monitoring usage. As one respondent said, the ability to understand performance is "... based on the whims of Mark Zuckerberg" (Interview D, personal communication, 4 April 2014).

Not all forms of social media have met the expectations of the staff. While the national Facebook page is perceived as successful based on the number of members and likes the Web page has received, Blue Star Families also relies on its pages connected with the state chapters (Interview C, personal communication, 2

April 2014). These chapter pages are maintained by volunteers in each location, and respondents indicated that these pages have limited participation (Interview A, personal communication, 2 April 2014). Part of the challenge has been to find volunteers willing and able to monitor and maintain the pages effectively. The effort required to constantly monitor the content posted on the page by users is both constant and intensive (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014), and it has been difficult for the organization to identify and cultivate chapter coordinators with the time and desire to maintain the chapter pages. As a result, the chapter pages become more like local bulletin boards than they do truly interactive spaces.

Similar challenges exist with the social media platforms maintained by the organization's core staff. As one respondent (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014) noted

You can never turn it off. There's no way for me to be available 24/7 to monitor comments so that's a struggle — being able to step away for a little bit ... you know we want to make sure nobody is saying things bad or mean or hurtful or anything toward — you know — the President — or anything we need to see and delete immediately ... I can't just be available 24/7 — I would be burned out very quickly.

Objectionable posts occurred most recently when Blue Star Families' members expressed their anger over federal budget cuts and the impact of these cuts on military families (Interview D, personal communication, 4 April 2014). In this case, members communicated on the social media platforms using inappropriate and offensive language that targeted individuals working in the federal government. This problem is magnified by the fact that the membership of the organization is located around world, which means that people are constantly interacting with the social media platforms. With most of the Blue Star Families staff located in the continental U.S., there is ample opportunity for someone in another time zone to post something objectionable, a post that might go unnoticed for several hours.

This issue is particularly important because Blue Star Families' core mission is the creation and maintenance of a community. The staff is concerned with maintaining their "brand," and ensuring that the discourse within the community is civil and respectful. Many of the issues important to the community can be divisive and controversial — sequestration, changes in military pay structures, etc. — and it is important to the organization to be inclusive and supportive of military families (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014). Moreover, the community they are creating cuts across traditional divisions within the military — they are not separated by branch of service, rank, location, or active duty or reserve status (Interview C, personal communication, 2 April 2014). Decades (and even centuries) of tradition are thus open to change, and Blue Star Families must walk a careful line to meet their organizational goals in a traditionally compartmented setting.

#### *Advocacy and civic engagement*

Interview respondents noted a number of activities related to the organization's advocacy and civic engagement efforts. In general, the organization encourages its members to become advocates of public policy issues and concerns related to military families (Interview A, personal communication, 2 April 2014). The organization's primary focus is to be a voice for military families, and it encourages its members to engage in advocacy and civic engagement activities to promote military issues from the ground up. Furthermore, the organization acts as a conduit between policy-makers and military families. For example, Blue Star Families' annual survey of its membership collects data on military issues that are then disseminated to policy-makers, the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and White House (Interview C, personal communication, 2 April 2014). For example, the U.S. Department of Defense highlights results of the Blue Star Families annual survey on its DoDLive social media Web site (Graham, 2010). Blue Star Families also uses its media platforms to disseminate information on behalf of the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and other military-related organizations to its membership, often resulting in live chats on the social media platforms (Interview C, personal communication, 2 April 2014). In December 2014, Blue Star Families and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs hosted a chat on the Blue Star Families Facebook page to discuss benefits for veterans' spouses, dependents, and survivors. In the last six months, the online chat has received over 36,000 views

(Facebook, 2015). Through these efforts, Blue Star Families keeps military families, policymakers, and government agencies informed of the different perspectives related to military issues and policies (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014; Interview A, personal communication, 2 April 2014).

Similarly, the organization strives to move its members up the ladder of engagement by encouraging individuals to view its social media sites, then participate in the organization's virtual communities and online chats, and contribute to live events organized by the national or local chapters (Interview A, personal communication, 2 April 2014; Interview C, personal communication, 2 April 2014). An example of one of these events is Books on Bases where military families donate books to military families in need and military-affected public and school libraries (Interview B, personal communication, 2 April 2014). The organization is also dedicated to engaging parents of active duty military in civic engagement activities, in addition to holding military spouse hiring fairs around the country (Interview C, personal communication, 2 April 2014; Interview D, personal communication, 4 April 2014). One of the respondents noted that the organization's ladder of engagement approach is modeled after the 2008 Obama campaign, of which many of the employees of the organization actively participated (Interview A, personal communication, 2 April 2014). While Blue Star Families encourages its members to participate in its online and boots-on-the-ground events, its advocacy and civic engagement activities are seen as an impetus to a larger grassroots effort of the organization to impact public policies related to military families.

From the basic organizational information and staff interviews, it appears that Blue Star Families is achieving its goal to advocate for military families as well as engaging its membership in civic participation. Interviews illustrate that the organization uses social media to raise the awareness of both general and policy issues related to military families. The metrics show a constant outreach and call for action to the online membership of the organization. The descriptive data illustrate Blue Star Families' persistence to spread its message advocating for a bipartisan cause to network and engage military families in civic engagement. However, this bipartisan neutrality is also a challenge for the organization to maintain in that its IRS tax status prevents the organization from advocating directly to legislators on behalf of its membership for or against a specific policy issue. The nature of the purpose and mission of the organization naturally draws in members with strong feelings on public policies affecting military members and their dependents. Within this realm, the organization communicates with the White House and U.S. Department of Defense to advocate in favor of military issues. One example is a recent partnership with the U.S. Department of Defense and National Endowment for the Arts to advocate for free admission for military families to museums across the country. Their advocacy efforts resulted in the Blue Star Museums Program that recruited over 2,000 museums nationwide to offer free admission to military families between Memorial Day and Labor (Blue Star Families, 2015a). At the same time, the organization is cognizant of the limitations it must adhere to in order not to cross the line from advocacy to lobbying. Respondents specifically noted that Blue Star Families does not engage in lobbying activities (Interview B, personal communication, 2 April 2014; Interview D, personal communication, 4 April 2014).

One challenge of determining the level of advocacy and civic engagement efforts of Blue Star Families is a direct result of the limited budget of the organization. Rather than purchasing software or hiring employees to determine the effectiveness of the organization's advocacy and civic engagement efforts, Blue Star Families determines its success based on no-cost Web site analytics offered by the social media platforms. As noted previously, interview respondents boasted that Blue Star Families has a membership of approximately 80,000 members, yet the organization is determining this number by combining the memberships of social media platforms without taking into consideration the overlapping membership between the different platforms (Interview A, personal communication, 2 April 2014; Interview C, personal communication, April 2, 2014, Interview D, personal communication, 4 April 2014). Thus, measuring the successes of the organization's online advocacy and civic engagement activities is challenging. In this same vein, the organization has no way of knowing whether followers are actually reading and following through with the message of the organization, or if they are simply browsing the social media site without digesting the information.

The above, extensive look at Blue Star Families appears to fit — at least inductively — our proposed model and is summarized in [Table 2](#).

**Table 2: Social media progression model with components & study findings.**

| Model hierarchy               | Components  | Summary of study findings   |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Organizational mission</i> | Goals (implicit and explicit)<br>Purpose (implicit and explicit)  | Support, connect, and empower geographically separated target users<br>Independence of space and time   |
| <i>Social media presence</i>  | Implementation of social media by the organization<br>Initiate engagement   | Implementation across all popular social media platforms<br>Usage of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Flickr, Pinterest, and Google Plus<br>Membership and access are unrestricted |
| <i>Reach</i>                  | Continued implementation and enhancements within social media<br>Increased levels of engagement (users and participation) | Counts users across all services, ranks, and duty status<br>Increased levels of participation; growth in a relatively short period of time<br>Conversion from informal                    |

|                                |  |  |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
|                                |  | to formal membership   |
| <i>Interaction &amp; usage</i> | Monitoring of social media user base<br>Improvement in understanding user base<br>Iteratively improve services | Connection to membership and between staff members primarily through social media<br>Interaction between members; not wholly passive<br>Subgroups of members to provide professional support, job openings, and sense of community<br>Cross-posting beyond user base |
| <i>Satisfaction</i>            | Goals and needs met by users and non-profit  | General satisfaction by users on national efforts; local groups may be more of a challenge due to consistency of desired interactivity<br>Monitor is done within the non-closed group to keep discourse civil and respectful   |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <p><i>Advocacy &amp; civic engagement</i></p> | <p>Serve users by obtaining funding or influencing policy bodies and supply partners<br/>Enhance efforts to complete organizational goals</p> | <p>Encourages members to become advocates of public policy issues and concerns related to military families<br/>Organization acts as a conduit between policy-makers and military families<br/>Media platforms used to disseminate information on behalf of external organizations<br/>Members encouraged to participate in the virtual communities and online chats<br/>Members inspired to take part in live events organized by the national or local chapters</p> |
|---|---|---|

While the success of social media advocacy and civic engagement is difficult to measure, the organization does illustrate some achievement in these areas as demonstrated by its relationship with the U.S. Department of Defense, White House, and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and its on-the-ground activities and events attended by its members and other military members and civilians. For example, in June 2015 First Lady Michelle Obama attended a Books on Bases event organized by Blue Star Families at

the U.S. Army garrison in Vicenza, Italy where the First Lady read books to a gymnasium of over 500 military families (Blue Star Families, 2015b).

Going forward, the organization plans to implement a more complex and accurate way of measuring its online membership and participation in social media activities, although the cost of these efforts continues to be a concern and limitation for the organization (Interview E, personal communication, 1 April 2014). The organization also plans to develop a true multi-sector virtual community that can engage more of the civilian community and younger service members in its efforts to raise awareness of military issues, although these plans are still in the making.



## Conclusions

Our research serves to highlight both the possibilities and the potential pitfalls of the use of social media by a non-profit to create a virtual community. The evidence presented suggests that Blue Star Families is working towards its quest to build a virtual community of military families, and it appears they have at least moderate success in terms of expanding that community to include members of the civilian population as well. Although the organization is relatively new, it has managed to create an inter-service community to a level previously unseen in the U.S. military.

For all its advancements, Blue Star Families faces several challenges in the near future and are closely related to the offered model. Solutions to these challenges are in many cases dictated by organizational resources, but together they serve as “cautionary tales” to other organizations wishing to undertake similar goals.

First, the difficulties cultivating chapter Web site coordinators speaks to an underlying problem of small organizations that rely heavily on volunteers to administer and facilitate organizational activities. This is amplified when the organization in question effectively operates on a 24-hour basis, 365 days per year, across the entire globe. While the chapters play an integral role in efforts to achieve the organizational mission, the lack of attention given to the chapters will likely have long-term consequences for the organization. Thus, while the linkage in the model between organizational mission and social media presence clearly exists at the level of the main organization, there is work to be done with the chapters.


Second, online metrics are limited and, therefore, actual reach of the social media presence is, at best, a rough estimate. Blue Star Families is only using Web site analytics offered by Facebook and Twitter, but there are other free analytical tools out there that can be employed. Organizations that rely so heavily on social media should ensure that they have the analytical tools available to evaluate their effectiveness. An organization could also make efforts to survey its membership to solicit direct feedback about the quality and effectiveness of its social media tools.

Third, in the case of Blue Star Families, it is difficult to ascertain the true membership of the organization due to overlap in the metrics used and reported by the organization. We suspect the actual number of participants in the community is significantly less than the number reported (perhaps as much as 50 percent of the reported number). While this is not meant as a criticism of the effectiveness of Blue Star Families (an active membership of 40,000 would still be exceptionally impressive), the lack of an accurate membership number will continue to hamper efforts to plan effectively; the fact that the membership number reported very likely contains a high number of overlapping data points may lead others to question the veracity of the organization and thus undermine the mission and success of Blue Star Families.

Fourth, monitoring the Web sites and other social media channels is difficult because of limited staff and worldwide use. As with other issues noted above, this difficulty is directly related to budget and staff constraints. Given the number of social media channels in use and the continual nature of interaction and usage, the required staff resources are significant; moreover, the monitoring function required also means the staff engaged in this activity must have both the authority and judgment to make quick decisions about the appropriateness of the content they monitor. This function is truly the most important core function of the organization. To fail to provide adequate resources for this function jeopardizes the long-term viability of the organization.



Fifth, the ability to maintain a neutral political and ideological position on issues related to the military, and to maintain a strict divide between advocacy and lobbying, is critical to the long-term effectiveness of Blue Star Families. If our model is accurate, then increased levels of satisfaction will lead to higher levels of both advocacy and civic engagement. In an era of hyper-partisanship, Blue Star Families has managed to maintain its political neutrality and remain true to its core mission, but it must also ensure that the line between advocacy and lobbying remains clear and unbreached.

In sum, Blue Star Families illustrates the potential of social media to create virtual organizations. The model presented in this paper offers a more structured framework through which scholars may consider the role of social media in non-profit organizations. While our findings are both preliminary and limited to a single case, it remains the subject of future research to determine whether our model provides descriptive or explanatory power in other settings. 

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## Notes

1. Gibbons, 2012, paragraph 2.
2. Preece and Shneiderman, 2009, p. 16.
3. Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013, p. 391.
4. Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013, p. 393.
5. Coursey and Morris, 2008, p. 524.
6. Coursey and Morris, 2008, p. 533.
7. Sashi, 2012, p. 261.
8. Sashi, 2012,, p. 262.
9. Sashi, 2012, pp. 262–263.
10. Sashi, 2012, pp. 263–264.
11. Sashi, 2012, p. 261.
12. Yin, 2003; Kumar, 2005; George and Bennett, 2005, p. 19.
13. King, 2004, p. 256.

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## Editorial history

Received 21 March 2015; revised 13 July 2015; accepted 1 October 2015.

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A new model to explore non-profit social media use for advocacy and civic engagement by David Chapman, Katrina Miller-Stevens, John C Morris, and Brendan O'Hallarn.

*First Monday*, Volume 20, Number 10 - 5 October 2015

<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5912/5002>

doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i10.5912>