

Effectiveness of Social Media in Disaster Fundraising: Mobilizing the Public towards Voluntary Actions

Aya Okada, Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Kanazawa University, Kanazawa, Japan

Yu Ishida, School of Project Design, Miyagi University, Sendai, Japan

Naoto Yamauchi, Osaka School of International Public Policy (OSIPP), Osaka University, Toyonaka, Japan

ABSTRACT

When a disaster strikes, nonprofit organizations face the need to mobilize resources as quickly as possible in a limited time frame. Given its characteristics to instantly spread information to masses of people, social media is considered one of the most effective ways for nonprofits to publicize opportunities to take voluntary actions. Despite the envisioned use, however, little has been examined about the effectiveness of social media in encouraging people to give. This paper takes the case of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear threat that struck Japan in 2011 to examine whether the use of social media was effective in nonprofit fundraising. Analyzing data collected in an original online survey, the authors find that the use of social media both *before* and *after* the disaster has a positive impact on the amount of donations that nonprofits raise.

KEYWORDS

Disaster, Donation, Facebook, Fundraising, Japan, Nonprofit Organizations, Social Media, Twitter, Voluntary Actions

1. INTRODUCTION

Nonprofit organizations today are one of the key actors in disaster relief, response, and reconstruction (Kapucu *et al.*, 2011). Not only are they active as first responders, but also as essential organizations that facilitate recovery while working closely with organizations in both public and private sectors (Kapucu, 2007).

Disasters are times when nonprofit organizations face the need to mobilize resources as quickly as possible in a limited time frame. Once an organization decides to engage in response activities, the nonprofit uses multiple communication channels to send out information to mobilize the people toward voluntary actions. These opportunities to make financial donations, in-kind giving, and/or to volunteer, become chances for people who are willing to help those suffering from the tragedy. Solnit (2009) described the emergence of such highly motivated population as “A Paradise Built in Hell.” Nonprofit organizations play an important role of providing an opportunity to transform the desire of these people into actual actions (Okada & Yamauchi, 2014).

Given its characteristics to instantly spread information to masses of people, social media is considered one of the most effective ways for nonprofit organizations to publicize opportunities of voluntary actions in critical situations. Social media refers to “interactive online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives with each other”

(Haddow & Haddow, 2014, p.242). Examples include Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, just to name a few. Mayfield (2006) sees participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectedness as key features that distinguish social media from traditional media.

Despite the envisioned use, little has been documented about how nonprofit organizations use social media in times of disasters to mobilize the public towards voluntary actions. Much less known is whether the use of social media is effective in encouraging people to give or to volunteer. In this paper, we take the case of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear threat that struck Japan in 2011 to examine the effectiveness of social media in nonprofit fundraising. To what extent did nonprofits use social media to mobilize the public towards voluntary actions? Did the use of social media change overtime from response to recovery phase? More importantly, was the use of social media effective in encouraging people to make financial contributions? We analyze these questions using an original data collected through an online survey.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA, DISASTERS, AND NONPROFITS

As an emerging new tool, social media has attracted much attention in both disaster studies and nonprofit studies. In this section, we review the literature in these bodies of work and highlight our contributions.

2.1. Social Media in Disaster Studies

Literature on disasters have explored wide range of possibilities that utilization of social media might bring about in disaster situations. Studies of crisis communication, in particular, highlight the potential use of social media in emergencies. Assuming the effectiveness of social media to share and spread information in the aftermath of disasters, both scholarship and practitioners have identified tips for its successful usage as part of organizational communication strategies (e.g. Haddow & Haddow, 2014; Veil *et al.*, 2011). Social media enable all types of organizations engaged in relief activities to put out information instantly to the public, therefore giving earliest possible warning and collecting the most up-to-date information from the ground. These new tools are also used to share information and to facilitate communication as well as collaboration among different types of organizations engaged in response activities (Gao *et al.*, 2011).

Studies also document and analyze the use of social media in actual cases of disasters. Researches conducted in Japan, for example, examine wide use of social media in the aftermath of the 2011 disaster (see Section 4 for the details of the disaster). Sekiya (2012) analyzed the purposes of Twitter use after the 2011 disaster. Kawai and Fujishiro (2013) analyzed how people used Twitter to obtain disaster-related information, and Yamamoto *et al.* (2012) examined the influence of Twitter use on people's perception of "safety" and "anxiety" following the disaster.

2.2. Social Media in Nonprofit Studies

Ever since the introduction of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, nonprofit organizations have looked into how they might adopt and utilize these tools. Given such trend, researchers have examined various ways for nonprofits to use social media. For example, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) examined Twitter utilization among 100 largest nonprofit organizations in the United States and identified three types of Tweet functions: information, community (e.g. giving recognition and thanks, acknowledgment of current and local events), and action (e.g. promoting an event, donation appeal, selling a product, call for volunteers and employees, lobbying and advocacy, join another site or vote for organization, learn how to help). Svensson *et al.* (2014) particularly highlighted the use of social media for nonprofits to disseminate information, to build engagement, and to facilitate action. Briones *et al.* (2011) conducted a case study of American Red Cross to document the use of social media to build strong and lasting relationships with potential supporters.

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