

# Intersections and Innovations

Change for Canada's Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector



The Muttart Foundation



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ISBN: 978-1-897282-30-4

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# Acknowledgements

For far too long, Canada has lacked a comprehensive resource examining Canada's charitable sector. That has now ended.

The Muttart Foundation has spent many years focusing on building the capacity of charities in this country. The publication of this collection is another contribution to that effort. By understanding more about itself, the sector can continue to develop and find new ways to serve Canadians and those in need outside our nation.

The authors of these essays bring different perspectives on the role and inner workings of Canada's charities. Collectively, they bring an unprecedented insight into the work of organizations whose diversity is exceeded only by their desire to serve.

It is difficult to express adequate appreciation to Dr. Susan Phillips of Carleton University for her leadership of this project. She has been a source of encouragement, persuasion, cajoling and improving authors from across the country. Her efforts now bear fruit as we make this material available to students, academics, practitioners and others interested in the history and future of Canada's charities.

Amanda Mayer of the Lawson Foundation volunteered at the outset to be the administrative overlord of the project, keeping the editors and authors up to date and keeping track of various versions of articles. We are so grateful for her skills, her patience and her friendship.

None of this would have been possible, of course, without the work of authors, themselves academics and/or practitioners. They took time from their schedules to contribute to a resource we hope many will find valuable.

Lesley Fraser did an incredible job in editing the various chapters and ensuring consistency. And Don Myhre of P40 Communications has again brought his talent to the fore in providing an attractive design for a Muttart publication.

The work of all of these individuals has come together in this resource which we dedicate to all of those in, or interested in, Canada's charitable sector.

Malcolm Burrows, President

Bob Wyatt, Executive Director



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### This book may be cited as:

Phillips, Susan D. and Wyatt, Bob (Eds) (2021) *Intersections and Innovations: Change for Canada's Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Muttart Foundation

### Individual Chapter Citations

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Phillips, Susan D. and Wyatt, Bob (2021) Intersections and Innovations: Change in Canada's Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector. In Susan D. Phillips and Bob Wyatt (Eds.), *Intersections and Innovations: Change for Canada's Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Muttart Foundation

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# Part III Innovation and Intersections

Community and Corporate  
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Measuring Impact and  
Communicating Success



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## Part III Innovation and Intersections

### Measuring Impact and Communicating Success

# Chapter 35 Social Media and Charities in Canada

Margaret Herriman  
Max Bell Foundation



The internet is an inextricable part of Canadian life. In 2019, 73% of Canadians spent three to four hours online each day (CIRA, 2019). Almost all Canadians have internet access in their homes, and most say they would not move to a house that does not have access to high-speed broadband (CIRA, 2019). Even when watching TV, one-quarter of Canadians are multitasking, using an internet-connected device (Ryan, 2018).

Social media is also a vital part of that online experience and has an increasing centrality in the lives of many Canadians: 77% of Canadians have a Facebook account, and 62% look at social media at least once a day (CIRA, 2019). Facebook is the third most visited site in Canada, after Google and YouTube (Vertex Media, 2019). Younger Canadians are socializing in person less and spending more time communicating on their devices (Thomson, 2018). Because people are spending more and more time on social media, they are getting more of their news and information there and less from traditional sources such as newspapers or television news programs.

It is no longer an option for charities and nonprofits to forgo an online presence. In 2019, 99% of Canadian nonprofits had a website, 94% had a Facebook page, and 89% had a Twitter account (Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2019). Charities know that this is an important way to reach people and that savvy social media participation can help them mobilize and engage with stakeholders. They use social media to create brand awareness, fundraise, share news about the organization and cause, and recruit volunteers (Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2019). This chapter outlines the existing social media landscape, explains how and why charities are using social media, and offers a risk analysis of that use.



# The Social Media Landscape in Canada

In Canada, people regularly use more than one social media platform. Facebook is the most popular and is the platform with the most even spread of demographics. It allows people – as individuals or organizations – to create a profile page where they can post text, photos, and links. Only a small amount of the information on a Facebook profile page is static. The most significant part of Facebook is the newsfeed, where users see posts from the users they are connected with (either through becoming friends or liking) and can comment on these posts. This newsfeed is constantly updating and includes advertisements. Users can also create and join groups and can make their posts visible to more or fewer viewers, though the default is to make information public. Depending on profile settings, some of this information can be seen without creating an account.

Twitter is the second most popular platform. Users create a simple profile and then post “tweets,” text limited to 280 characters, as well as links and photos, and retweet other users’ content or reply to other users’ tweets. Twitter also has a newsfeed that constantly refreshes. Users follow other users or hashtags. By marking a post with a hashtag, users participate in a conversation. For example, by marking posts with #funny or #blackhistorymonth, users can spread information, participate in a conversation, and attract users to their content. Of all social media platforms, Twitter is the most focused on timeliness. Tweets are short, quippy, and of the moment. Much of the content on Twitter can be viewed without joining the site, but users can tweet or follow others only if they have a username.

YouTube relies on videos. Users range from people uploading video from their cellphones to record labels uploading music videos to major networks uploading content from their broadcast shows. Anyone can view YouTube videos without an account, although an account is needed to upload or comment on videos.

LinkedIn is a networking site used almost exclusively for professional contacts. A user’s profile page is their CV and remains static. People connect with one another and post content usually related to their job or industry. Job searchers and recruiters use LinkedIn to find one another. Generally, only people active in the professional world have a LinkedIn account, and most people do not post information about their personal lives.

Instagram and Snapchat are also popular social media platforms, although they tend to be used more frequently by younger generations. Both are photo-based. Instagram users post photos and videos with captions and hashtags and use filters to manipulate the look of their photos. These posts go into a constantly refreshing feed that also includes advertisements. Instagram makes it easy to cross-post with Facebook. Snapchat users send each other photo and video messages and create Snapchat stories. Most Snapchat photos and videos disappear after viewing.

Pinterest is like an online scrapbook that allows people to collect links and photos. People make Pinterest boards about crafting, cooking, clothing, interior decorating, and motivational images and quotes.

The above is a very brief, simple introduction to social media and is in no way exhaustive or authoritative. There are other forms of social media not discussed here, such as Tumblr



or TikTok, and platforms evolve over time. As Facebook has grown more popular with older generations, for example, younger users have migrated to sites like Instagram and Snapchat. Tumblr, a site that allowed users to blog and re-blog content, rose and fell in popularity as trends changed.

For charities, Facebook and Twitter are likely the most important social media platforms, although this will almost certainly change over the coming years. Some charities, for example, have begun using mobile messaging apps like WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger to communicate with stakeholders (Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2019). Charities interested in connecting primarily with youth may have more success on Instagram. All will need to remain nimble and responsive to the needs and preferences of their stakeholders.

## The Potential and Limitations of Social Media

Social media shapes the way we see and understand the world. As an accessible public platform, there is a sense that voices have been democratized in these spaces. Grassroots movements focused on social justice have the potential to gain a far greater reach and grow more quickly than ever before. Although both movements were initiated in the United States, the #blacklivesmatter and #metoo grassroots movements quickly spread to Canada and elsewhere. In both cases, activism on social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, allowed people across the globe to share their stories and support. Social media allowed people in many locations to simultaneously feel mobilized and engaged about the same issue (Hou & Lampe, 2018).

Social media has also facilitated the creation of communities of people who share the same political or value systems. Because the algorithms allow users to choose what accounts to follow, it is easy for users to follow and see sources of information that conform to the views they already hold. Social media can facilitate an echo-chamber effect, with users seeing viewpoints that allow them to become more and more entrenched in their own perspectives. Most online discussion around climate change, for example, is conducted between people that already share the same views, and fewer people seek out forums and conversations where their views will be challenged (Williams, McMurray, Kurz, & Lambert, 2015).

Though users have the sense, especially on Facebook, that what they are seeing is a rolling feed of sources they have liked or selected, social media algorithms are incredibly complex. Behind the scenes, Facebook examines all the potential posts that could appear in a user's feed and posts them in the order most likely to produce a positive reaction. This can amplify the echo-chamber effect, ensuring that posters see even more of the news sources and opinions that they already agree with and reducing the number of things they might potentially disagree with.

Social media is rife with people attempting to influence and inform as many people as they can connect with: every user has the ability to share a link to a news or opinion article with their own comments. As traditional news media disappear, news outlets are increasingly designed for consumption online and are primarily promulgated through social media. Many of these sites are niche-specific, and rather than attempting to serve an entire place-based community, they



focus on issues, often from a particular perspective, and many are political in nature, with a pronounced right or left bent.

Not all posters on social media are who they appear to be. While social media has facilitated the growth of organic grassroots movements, it has also been host to manufactured movements. “Astroturfing” occurs when organizations give the impression of being grassroots movements by creating multiple fake accounts that make it appear as though many individuals are posting content related to a specific issue. In 2019, Facebook took down nearly two billion fake accounts per quarter, rising to 1.7 billion in the first quarter of 2020 (Deep, 2020; Hao, 2020).

In addition, the line between news and entertainment is becoming increasingly blurred. The site BuzzFeed, founded in 2006, has tracked and aggregated amusing viral content, much of which was shared on Facebook. By 2018, the site had added a robust news section, including original investigative reporting, and won a National Magazine Award and a George Polk Award and was shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize and the Michael Kelly Award. Many of these articles were also shared on Facebook, alongside quizzes from the site that might determine which Harry Potter character you are most like or how mature your Starbucks order makes you.

Social media has also produced a variety of new careers. Social media influencers, many of whom use Instagram and are increasingly moving to Facebook, are people who market lifestyle products to their followers. Influencers form relationships with brands and companies – some with many brands – creating photos, videos, and vignettes that highlight the appeal of these products. They gain their own followers and market to them by suggesting that the influencers use these brands themselves, downplaying their relationship with the company. Much of the content on social media exists, either explicitly or implicitly, to sway users to buy a product or adopt a certain viewpoint.

Privacy is not a foregone conclusion on social media. There have been a number of publicized hacks and data leaks, as well as attempts to exploit or manipulate algorithms and feeds. In 2018, for example, a whistleblower revealed that the company Cambridge Analytica had harvested millions of American Facebook profiles in a data breach and used the information to build a program that allowed them to predict and influence American choices at the ballot box in the 2016 presidential election (Cadwalladr & Campbell, 2018).

Social media users also have their data used by social media companies and their funders. All popular social media is free to join, and so the business model of these companies is based on advertising revenue. In order to appeal to advertisers, platforms allow companies to target their messaging to specific demographics. These demographics are not just age, gender, and location; they are also based on users’ interests and content they have reacted positively to in the past. Facebook especially has been criticized for selling and sharing data about users and for collecting information in underhanded ways, like accessing the microphones in users’ phones and using voice-recognition software to collect information for advertisers.

Despite the rocky landscape of social media, it is still a central part of many Canadians’ lives, and it is easy to understand why. Where else can a person see photos of their friend’s vacation, smile at a funny cat meme, and catch up on provincial politics, all by scrolling down the same page? Canadian charities are doing their best to have their posts appear regularly between beach photos and news posts.



# Social Media and Charities

It is undeniable that many charities and NGOs are doing their work at least partly online: 77% of Canadian charities agree that social media appeals are an effective way to conduct online fundraising campaigns, and online giving increased by 17% in 2017 from the previous year (Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2019; CanadaHelps, 2020). Charitable giving using smartphones and tablets is rising particularly rapidly, with an increase of 8% in 2019 alone (CanadaHelps, 2020). Charities also use social media to deepen relationships with stakeholders, build awareness of their brand, share news, attract event attendees, steward existing donors, and recruit volunteers. Social media helps keep charities top of mind for their followers and stakeholders.

Charities are eager to reap the potential benefits of social media. Searching for “charities and social media” on the internet returns pages of guides suggesting ways charities can use social media to their advantage, and nonprofit-sector blog posts are filled with tips and tricks and top mistakes to avoid. In addition, organizations like [CanadaHelps](#) have thorough guides on how charities can adopt and optimize social media to stay relevant to donors and community members.

In part, social media appeals to charities because it is a way to build community with a broad group of stakeholders. In many cases, social media levels the playing field by giving organizations equal opportunities to be heard. By making it possible for people to share information about a cause or group, social media allows individual users to feel a sense of solidarity with one another (Morgan, 2013). While the final goal may be to mobilize individual action, such as having people become regular donors or volunteers, the medium-term goals are often to build trust and relationships and make followers feel as though they are part of a larger community. These relationships can be built by posting content to many followers and then engaging with those followers as they comment or retweet or share the original post. To be truly effective at social media, charities must know who their audiences are and what kind of communications they respond best to (Morgan, 2013).

Social media also enables organizations to leverage the existing connections of their followers. If charities effectively identify their target audiences and the communication practices that appeal to them, they can hope to gain sustained attention. This promotion takes the form of sharing news, updates, and fundraising but also provides opportunities for organic conversation and connection. By creating messages that followers “like” and share, content becomes visible to the followers of those followers as well, meaning exponential growth is theoretically possible (Younan, 2017). Much of this work comes down to successful brand management, ensuring that organizations become credible messengers and partners (Kylander & Stone, 2012).

This leveraging, however, is not without risk. Social media presents a range of potential, conquerable risks for charities.

Successful social media engagement is a time-consuming endeavour. To use social media most effectively, organizations need to develop strategic plans for what they want to achieve. These plans include which platforms they will create accounts for, what their key performance indicators will be, and what products and methods they will use to track these indicators. Organizations will also need to decide on a posting schedule, how they will create their content, and how much staff time they are willing to devote to social media. [CanadaHelps](#) suggests that



organizations should expect to spend two to five hours a week executing social media and five to six hours a month creating social media content per platform. Because social media is a visual platform, posts that contain eye-catching visuals or appealing multimedia tend to be the most successful. At minimum, charities need to spend time searching out images or videos, or they need to create their own – which requires an investment of time and money.

Many charities choose to use some kind of paid posting in addition to free posts. Paid accounts allow users to post automated content, place ads that show up in Facebook feeds and sidebars, and boost older popular posts back to the top of followers' newsfeeds, thus ensuring that posts arrive at a steady rate. Generally, organizations that post interactive content on a regular schedule are the most successful in gaining and retaining followers and converting those followers into donors.

Large organizations may already be well positioned to do this work. They may already be creating blogs and newsletters and have the capacity to direct organizational resources into social media. For small organizations, this investment of time and money may be prohibitive (Hou & Lampe, 2018). In addition, these investments may not pay the kinds of dividends that charities are expecting or hoping for. Despite the wealth of guides available and the services that track every click and mention, there are no silver bullets that ensure that a particular social media strategy will be successful.

One of the perils of social media for charities is “slacktivism.” This refers to the practice of individuals sharing and liking content related to a particular cause but taking no action beyond that. Social media users, especially those interested in social justice or environmentalism, can be bombarded with information, statistics, and news about different causes by a slew of awareness campaigns (Christiano & Neimand, 2017). Getting through to a call-to-action can be a difficult bar to clear. It can be easy, and encouraging, for charities to get likes on Facebook and retweets, but transforming a like into donations or a signature on a petition can be difficult (Hou & Lampe, 2018). To overcome slacktivism, charities must also issue calls-to-action, with small and achievable steps, to a narrow target audience (Christiano & Neimand, 2017).

Social media can also pose potential legal risks for Canadian charities. Though they are not insurmountable, charities should familiarize themselves and their staff and volunteers with the parameters they need to remain within.

When undertaking an audit of a charity, the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) will often examine that charity's social media posts to ensure that they are in compliance. A charity's social media presence must exist to further the stated purpose of the charity, so all posts must conform to that guideline. In addition, the charity may not use its social media to provide a private benefit to a business or individual. When posting about businesses connected with the organization, for example, charities must be careful not to provide anything that might look like free advertising. Finally, charities must be careful to avoid posting anything that could be construed as prohibited partisan political activities. Charities cannot use their social media to promote a particular candidate, for example (Miller Thomson LLP, 2018).

Charities also need to ensure that they are complying with privacy legislation. Any personal information posted to social media must be backed up by appropriate consents. Posting photos also carries some risk. If a charity wishes to post photos of an event, it should have consent from the attendees. Posting photos of minors can be especially risky because they are unable to



consent on their own, and Canadian courts have not always upheld rulings that parental consent is sufficient. Posting personal content and photos is possible, but before doing so, charities and their employees and volunteers should have a good understanding of the risks, constraints, and need for comprehensive consent (Miller Thomson LLP, 2018).

A final risk for charities is that social media can be accessed by anyone and everyone, including harassers and trolls. To reach a broad audience, charities tend to make their messaging and accounts as public as possible. An unintended consequence of this is that people are able to make harassing, derogatory, or threatening comments on posts. Some of this harassment occurs because the commenter disagrees with the work or purpose of the charity (Christiano & Neimand, 2017). Charities have the ability to delete comments on their posts and block serial harassers, but this is a time-consuming, unpleasant activity that many charities do not factor in to their social media strategies.

There is, of course, a risk to not participating in social media. Given the amount of time that Canadians spend on social media, not engaging with them there constitutes a potentially lost opportunity. As early as 2013, the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* reported that social media had changed the landscape so dramatically that traditional methods of donor engagement were no longer effective (Dixon & Keyes, 2013). Though not every charity has a successful viral video or fundraising campaign that nets them tens of thousands of dollars in a day, many charities are quietly, effectively, and efficiently engaging with supporters using multiple platforms and integrating their online and offline communications.

## Conclusion

Canadians are spending more of their time online, and much of that time on social media. Charities are working to be a part of the Canadian social media landscape so that they can effectively spread the message about their purpose and activities and build an online community. Social media poses risks for charities, but despite those risks many charities are effectively using multiple platforms to reach and connect with their stakeholders. The landscape is constantly evolving, requiring continual improvement and vigilance.



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# Biography

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Before joining Max Bell Foundation in 2016, Margaret Herriman worked in communications, fund development, and program delivery at several Calgary nonprofits, including YMCA Calgary, the University of Calgary, and Glenbow Ranch Park Foundation. She earned a Bachelor of Journalism from the University of King's College and a Master of Arts in history from the University of Calgary.

