Overview of Fake News: For Non-Profit Organizations

Spring 2018

Rebecca J. Stortstrom  
*University of Central Florida, rebecca.stortstrom@ucf.edu*

Linda Lagrace  
*University of Central Florida*

Nathaniel King III  
*University of Central Florida*

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Statement of the Problem-From a nonprofit view

Final Project

Linda Lagrace
Nathaniel King III
Rebecca Stortstrom

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Introduction

In the U.S., the media plays a pivotal role in the spreading of information. However, the nonprofit sector appears to have a complicated relationship with the media. The media is a strong source of marketing and spreading the message, mission, and vision of the nonprofit, and is a way to keep connected with stakeholders. However, the nonprofit sector use of the media seems more susceptible to the effects of “fake news”. In this section, the history of nonprofit organizations along with its relationship with the media and fake news will be discussed. In addition, strategies to combat the problem or fake news and the promotion of media literacy will also be explored.

I. History of nonprofit organizations and current public perceptions

The idea of philanthropy and working for the public good rather than for profit is a concept that has existed from the early days of our country. The earliest settlers in the Massachusetts Bay colonies in the 1600s were Puritans who pledged themselves to Christian ideals of giving and helping each other in their foreign new land (Neuman, 2010). Centuries later, Civil War nurse Clara Barton founded one of the most well-known nonprofit organizations-the Red Cross (Red Cross, n.d.). In the 19th and early 20th centuries, wealthy men wrote of the imperative to eschew work for wages and donate to philanthropic and charitable causes. Andrew Carnegie wrote The Gospel of Wealth in 1889 and spoke of having a duty to society (Muslic, n.d.).
While a few people and groups laid the foundation for the concept of nonprofit organizations, the history of what we think of as the modern nonprofit in the U.S. is relatively brief. Peter Hall estimates that about 90 percent of nonprofits in America were created after 1950 (Hall, n.d.). Today, the concept of nonprofits includes 29 types of tax-exempt groups, encompassing everything from education, to religious groups, to social justice advocacy (National Council of Nonprofits, n.d.).

In general, Americans seem to like nonprofits, particularly charitable groups. A poll conducted by The Chronicle of Philanthropy in 2015 found that only 35% of Americans surveyed had little to no confidence in charities, while over 80% had confidence that charities are fulfilling their missions and helping people (Perry, 2015). One major concern highlighted in this study was how nonprofits spend their money. The Chronicle study found that about 84% of respondents said that it was very or somewhat important to know that nonprofits spending low amounts on salary and administration when choosing where to donate (Perry, 2015).

**Nonprofit organizations, media, and ‘fake news’**

In an era of new media, nonprofit organizations are under the microscope more than ever. Some of the criticisms of nonprofit organizations have come to light due to our ever-present connectivity, Twitter, and other forms of social media. Non Profit organizations that lean “left” or “right” on the political spectrum are particularly susceptible to media manipulations, or “fake news.”

Planned Parenthood learned about the role the new media and ‘fake news’ can play in an interesting case a few years ago. The organization, which is over 100 years old, provides low-cost to free reproductive healthcare options (including abortions), and according to its mission,
“believes sexual and reproductive health rights are basic rights” (Planned Parenthood, n.d.) In 2014, two anti-abortion activists gained access to Planned Parenthood meetings and staff lunches and secretly recorded them, capturing footage of Planned Parenthood employees discussing procurement and reimbursement processes for fetal tissue (Levitan, 2015). The videos were then edited and posted to an anti-abortion website and quickly went viral.

Social media exploded in the wake of these viral ‘sting’ videos. Hashtags describing Planned Parenthood as “selling baby parts” and calls to “defund Planned Parenthood” quickly filled Twitter users’ timelines. One study found that the hashtag “#defundPP” was Tweeted over 1.3 million times in the span from July 2015- January 2016 (Han et. al, 2017).

The idea that Planned Parenthood was selling fetal tissue in an illegal manner or for profit, was in fact, fake news. A report from NPR found that of the 12 states that investigated Planned Parenthood’s fetal tissue practices, none had definitely found any wrongdoing by the nonprofit organization (Kurtzleben, 2016). Planned Parenthood maintains that the videos were deceptively edited for partisan purposes.

Appendix A contains an infographic with more information about the scope of this incident and how this nonprofit handled a major ‘new media’ crisis. This example shows that new forms of media, combined with Americans’ current predilection for information that reflects their political biases, can cause major problems for nonprofit organizations. While the viral videos and corresponding Twitter uproar did not necessarily hurt Planned Parenthood, it is an example of how certain nonprofits can be caught in the webs of fake news.
II. How changes in media have helped nonprofits

According to Guo and Saxton (2018), social media has become the both the best ally and worst enemy for nonprofits in just the past ten years in their mission to serve their communities (p. 5). One of the ways in which social media has helped nonprofits is by serving as an alternative broadcast and communication medium (p. 6). Another way in which social media has helped nonprofits is by educating, engaging with, and mobilizing large audiences of supporters in a low cost and interactive fashion (p.6). According to Feng, Du, and Ling (2017), social media helps as both a marketing tool and a means to increase support from the public (p. 1775). Therefore, it appears that social media has the ability to amplify marketing and outreach efforts while significantly reducing costs. However, a key factor in the effectiveness of social media for nonprofits is the concept of public attention.

Public attention is considered a “key prerequisite for social change and an immediate measure of the effectiveness of an organization’s social media usage,” (p.6). Public attention is defined as “the extent to which multiple audience members (individuals and organizations) react to the messages sent by an organization on its social media platform(s),” (p.8). Therefore, public attention is such an important step because it allows for organizations to convince, recruit, and mobilize the public and stakeholders (p. 8). One of the challenges of the digital world is the amount of information overload that tends to divert the public’s attention due to different and an array of causes (p. 7). However, social media helps capture public through “signals”, such as videos, tweets, etc., to capture public attention to desirable information and help the public avoid the “noise” of irrelevant and rivaling digital information (p. 8).
Media literacy is currently used as an educational tool that helps the learners get establishment in the creation of media, in the capturing and broadcast of information to the relevant concerned parties. Education on press helps the participant further understand the roles media plays in several parts of the society, for example, the role of media in politics, in religion, in social activities among many others.

Lately, media seems to be biased which is against the constitutional amendment act that states that any one person or state should not influence media and the subsequent passing of information, yet this seems to be the case lately. Media previously was an independent entity, but lately, it is involved with cover-ups and biases that can only mean another player or entity is currently running the show behind the scenes for different reasons (Stacey, 2018). It has led to mistrust of the mainstream media, and people have turned to the internet yet even in the internet, firms have been set whose sole purpose is to counter any correct information with fake news, meaning if you want to get to the truth, you need to dig a little deeper.

Media Literacy Non-Profit

Media literacy is the ability to observe and judge all kinds of information quarters and how it is put out. To understand the truths of the things that are not true. Media has a habit of changing and recreating itself over time, hence the ability to understand the different aspects of the press is necessary and advised Sarikakis & Winter, 2017).

Trust in public institutions has also been affected over the years and this is primarily because most of these institutions do not have a tradition of ethical responsibility or even ethics
themselves. You find that most of the senior members or the top tier members of these institutions are caught in scandals that range from embezzlement of public funds to sexual harassment issues. This is broadcast to the public, which leads the audience to lose faith in these institutions. Some of the employees of most of the public institutions are involved in corruption and other vices that affect the public and bring the credibility of the institutions down (LaHurd, 2017).

Nonprofits have also become not trustworthy with scandals involving them coming up every day. For example, the current issue concerning Oxfam a Swedish abused nonprofit that includes sexual harassment cases from countries some of their top personnel have been. Additionally, other firms were being accused of involvement in sponsoring terrorist groups; others have been charged with getting involved in the politics of the countries they are meant to be serving on neutral grounds. This has spoilt the previous good name and ideology that was associated with the non-governmental firms among the public (Hall, 2016).

Fake news is a part of journalism that produces and an aired story that is not true or put out news to fool people on specific issues. This kind of news causes problems such as believability of the real information if it has already produced and aired or if the info is about to be broadcast. This kind of news became famous after the wiki leaks scandals. It is seen as a way of government and different institutions mitigating the effects of real information that is often leaked or where there is the possibility of whistleblowing, they preempt the news and hence can navigate the likely outcome and investigations that come up after such report is released.

In all this persuasion plays a significant role, whereby for people to buy into this information there must be a compelling story built. Hence, they create an account that is as near to the truth as possible but tweaks minor details (Sarikakis & Winter, 2017).
The problem with fake news it has had some significant victories in causing upheavals in governments in places such as France, this has led the non-governmental organizations to start combating this. Some of the methods used to fight this include:

**The Use of the Public Librarian Associations**

The librarians are the known custodians of information, so in cases of fake news, the librarians have taken to airing their resources and information gathered from the real information.

Establishment of campaigns to combat and educate people on the fake news and their effects. A campaign like the international fact-checking day that was activated and carried out in 2nd April 2007 and pushed by the global network for fact-checking at polymer was joined by many other organizations that educated the public on the dangers of fake news and on places one could access useful resources and accurate news and information from (Hall, 2016).

Organizations have also gone directly to the generation of tomorrow that is the students in their classes with lessons on fake news and how to identify them. Colleges too have gotten in on the action and encouraged the student to interact well on social media and promote the right type of information and be judges to real information and call out those spreading fake information (Zeng, 2016).

At young organization in Boston called *Press Pass TV*, the young teenagers are taught how to assess news media as they learn video animation, production, and photography. It changed the name to *Transformative Culture Project* in January this year. Accordingly, it has become a norm to judge the credibility news of recent. For instance, in Boston in the course of the last elections, many journalists, educators, and other professionals busy with elections in
which a pseudo-news website flourished through publishing fake news, that caused a gunman to threaten to shoot the restaurant patrons based on fake news and the president-elect published on twitter claims that were unsubstantiated.

Therefore, media literacy is critical in the contemporary world where many people who reject genuine sources of news and opt to believe anything they read or see on the Internet. Nevertheless, campaigns demanding for media literacy throughout the United States schools still have a long way to go. Accordingly, it is only in Minnesota where the subjected has been incorporated into the typical core standards. Following suit, Washington State required that state education authorities implement a strategy that would teach media literacy in the schools. Consequently, other states are emulating the move and adopting strategies to integrate such education into their syllabuses.

It has been established that media literacy is contemporarily employed as an educational component, which assists the students in understanding the media creation tenets. Similarly, media literacy helps learners in the capturing and broadcast of information to the relevant concerned parties. Education on press helps the participant further understand the roles media plays in several parts of the society, for example, the role of media in politics, in religion, in social activities among many others. Accordingly, most of the senior members or the top tier members of educational institutions are culprits to scandals that range from embezzlement of public funds to sexual harassment issues. This is broadcast to the public, which leads the audience to lose faith in these institutions. Some of the employees of most of the public institutions are involved in corruption and other vices that affect the public and bring the credibility of the institutions down. Therefore, such type of broadcast leads to issues such as believability of the real information if it has already produced and aired or if the info is about to
be broadcast. This kind of news became famous after the wiki leaks scandals. Consequently, it is considered a way of government and different institutions mitigating the effects of real information that is often leaked or where there is the possibility of whistleblowing, they preempt the news and hence can navigate the likely outcome and investigations that come up after such report is released. For that reason, it is correct to conclude that no-profit media outlets have become untrustworthy, and are marred by numerous continuous scandals that entail them being caught up in endless scandals daily. For instance, the contemporary problem of the Swedish non-profit organization, Oxfam includes sexual harassment issues from the nations that some of their senior personnel have been working. Moreover, other companies were accused of engaging in sponsoring terrorist activities.

IV. Nonprofits, communication, and social media

Doris Graber states that messages relayed to the public depend on adequate, reliable channels (Graber, 2003, p. 204). This means clear, concise, and standardized information that minimizes what she calls “gobbledygook.” While Graber’s discussion was in the context of government organizations and agencies, this premise can apply to nonprofits as well. One way a nonprofit can do this is to have a robust social media strategy. This section explores how nonprofits can use social media to enhance communication, which could possibly combat misinformation and fake news.

The Cambridge dictionary defines social media as “websites and computer programs that allow people to communicate and share information on the internet using a computer or mobile phone” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.) For many of us, social media is a part of our everyday lives; however, some studies have shown that nonprofit organizations are not using social media to its fullest potential. One study in 2015 used qualitative interviews to gauge the social media
practices of human services nonprofits organizations. The study classified 70% of the organizations sampled as either “non-users” or “beginner-sporadic” users of social media (Goldkind, 2015). This meant that they either did no social media work, or had a Facebook account, possibly a Twitter account, but no true strategy behind their social media use. Many of the participants in this study felt that their nonprofit organizations had obstacles to robust social media strategy—in particular, a lack of time, a lack of knowledge, and a lack of resources to train or pay a full-time social media/communications expert (Goldkind, 2015).

Key relationship building for public/nonprofit entities is important but difficult to do. Taylor and Kent (as cited in Briones, Kuch, Liu, and Jin, 2011) discussed the creation of organizational-public relationships on the Internet, and Hallahan (as cited in Briones, Kuch, Liu and Jin, 2011) later named five concepts that measure organizational-public internet relationships. These included commitment, communality, control mutuality, satisfaction, and trust (Hallahan, 2008; as cited in Briones et. al, 2011). Of these five, Hallahan (as cited in Briones et. al, 2011) noted that trust is difficult to achieve, as the organization must be believable, reliable, and consistent.

**Literature Review/Case Study: The Red Cross’ Use of Social Media**

The Red Cross is one of the more well-known nonprofit organizations in the U.S. Founded in 1881 by nurse Clara Barton, the Red Cross has chapters in nearly every U.S. state and territory, and a wide-ranging mission that includes blood donations, disaster relief, healthcare/first aid training, and international aid (The Red Cross, n.d.).

A 2011 study by Rowena Briones, Beth Kuch, Brooke Liu, and Yin Jang wanted to examine how this large and well-known nonprofit used social media to engage the public. They
specifically wanted to know: What the Red Cross was already doing in regards to engaging the public via social media, what barrier the Red Cross faced in their use of social media, and what further opportunities exist to build relationships (Briones et al, 2011).

The team conducted 40 qualitative interviews with Red Cross employees who were responsible for social media communications. The sample of Red Cross employees interviewed reported that they used Facebook and Twitter the most to build relationships with the public. They unanimously said that their primary objective to social media use was a “two-way communication loop”, with feedback and public opinion of the Red Cross being extremely important to the organization (Briones et. al, 2011). Twitter was used to advertise local events and share ideas with other chapters, but also to build vital relationships with the media. Interviewees spoke of using Twitter to get in touch with reporters and to get real-time updates on disasters/crisis situations from new outlets (Briones et. al, 2011).

The study also highlighted challenges Red Cross employees and volunteers faced and opportunities they hoped the organization would embrace in the social media landscape. The employees interviewed said that the main barriers they faced in building a strong social media program were lack of resources, lack of buy-in from board members, and lack of understanding of social media from older generations (Briones et. al, 2011). The staff interviewed hoped that their national headquarters would become more involved in social media engagement. They wanted to see guidance regarding content and training coming from a national level (Briones et. al, 2011).

Nonprofits often face unique challenges that are not a problem in the corporate world—they are small or decentralized and have limited resources. However, social media engagement is
important for building trust for nonprofits and establishing relationships with the community and media.

V. Combating the problem: Nonprofits that promote media literacy

Non-profits are not just on the reactive side of new media and fake news; they can also be proactive in combating misinformation, fake news, and promoting media literacy. Several national non-profits take proactive approaches through education and community programs.

Many media literacy nonprofits are geared towards children. An article from a 2017 pediatrics journal noted that introducing children to concepts of new media/media literacy can mitigate the effects that negative content in media and maximize positive influences, leading to healthier behavior and social interactions (Hawley Turner et al, 2017). Therefore, developing common sense media habits in children is a key focus of a few nonprofits. Media Literacy Now is one such organization, with a mission stating that its purpose is to “ensure all K-12 students receive comprehensive media literacy education and skills” (Media Literacy Now, n.d.). The organization has had some successes passing legislation that would change education requirements in public schools.

NAMLE- the National Association for Media Literacy Education- takes a broader approach. This nonprofit, based in New York, has a mission statement that discusses media education in both formal and informal settings and discusses media and new technology for children and adults (NAMLE, n.d.).

Other non-profits take on the battle of misinformation and fake news by working to improve and restore trust in journalism. The Center for Public Integrity is one such organization. Founded in 1989, it takes a nonpartisan, no lobbying/advocacy work, investigative journalistic
approach and covers investigative stories. The organization has won numerous awards, including
two Pulitzer Prizes.

This list is by no means exhaustive but shows the work that nonprofits can do from a
proactive standpoint to encourage media literacy and protect journalism.

Appendix A. Infographic on Planned Parenthood’s Viral Video Controversy

The infographic below illustrates the timeline referenced in Section 1 regarding Planned
Parenthood and the viral videos from the Center for Medical Progress. The release of a series of
videos unleashed a social media backlash that was an indicator of how nonprofits can be affected
by “fake news” and emerging forms of media.
July 2014: Anti-abortion activists from Center for Medical Progress secretly record lunch meeting with Planned Parenthood executives discussing fetal tissue processes.

July 14, 2015: Series of Planned Parenthood videos released by CMP.


6.88 M tweets

Total tweets containing phrase “Planned Parenthood”

#DEFUNDPP
1.36 M tweets

#STANDWITHPP
795K tweets

Impact

2015-2017: Multiple states investigated Planned Parenthood’s fetal tissue donation practices. No definitive evidence of wrongdoing was found.

Dec. 2017: DOJ requests documents from Senate committee in relation to Planned Parenthood’s practices, indicating plan to continue investigation.

Sources:


References


