

ESSAY

Social Media and Digital Storytelling for Social Good

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This case study examines the Blue Roots Project, a graduate studies collaboration between Michigan-based, online water journalism organization Circle of Blue and the Center for Emerging Media Design and Development at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. The Blue Roots Project is a community arts and digital storytelling project that uses social media channels to elicit user-generated content focused on the effects of the world's freshwater crisis. The project uses social media as a tool for the following goals:

accessing previously established virtual communities, connecting with the audience on the digital platforms where they already gather, creating a dialogue about social issues, eliciting user-generated content, creating new access points for the project stakeholders, and building a symbiotic relationship with a new audience.

Keywords: digital storytelling; social media strategy; user-generated content; design thinking; social good

Circle of Blue is a Michigan-based online news organization that reports on the global freshwater crisis and all of the aspects of human life that crisis affects: food, politics, management, quality, infrastructure, culture, and climate to name a few. However, their highly technical reporting does not reach a broad audience, only those who were already aware of water issues and involved in what Circle of Blue called the “water space:” researchers, advocates, journalists, and policymakers.

In the spring of 2016, a partnership between the Center for Emerging Media Design and Development (EMDD), a Master of Arts program at Ball State University in Muncie,

Indiana, and Circle of Blue was created to address these issues. Using the design thinking method (Plattner, n.d.), a team of four EMDD students developed a project to help Circle of Blue reach a broader and younger audience.

This project challenged the audience to create and express their experiences with water through various forms of art and digital storytelling, known as user-generated content (UGC). Additionally, the project challenged the audience to connect and compare their experiences to the value of water across geography, class, and culture. The project achieved these two challenges through digital platforms, including a website and various social media channels. This project came to be called The Blue Roots Project.

The Blue Roots Project is a primarily digital experience through two main outlets: the project website www.bluerootsproject.org and several social media outlets, including Facebook, Instagram, Soundcloud, YouTube, Vimeo, and Twitter. The central idea of the Blue Roots Project asks participants to contribute stories through a series of eight challenges that focus on water-related issues. For example, the first challenge asks participants to tell a story about their favorite water-related memory. For each challenge, the participants can submit their story through different forms of art, including classical art, writing, photography, video, poetry, etc. Each challenge focuses on different aspects of life that water issues affect, including culture, religion, quality, and politics, among others.

Although the central hub of the project is the website, social media platforms are a key tool in making the project successful. Social media channels were used for two specific goals: to access and connect with already established communities in the sphere of influence of water issues, and to collaborate with these communities through user-generated content in order to create a dialogue about the global water crisis.

Using social media to access digital communities

Communities are now no longer limited to geographic location or culture as they were before the invention of the Internet. The evolution of technology and the advent of the Internet gave rise to a new kind of community: digital communities. These digital communities are influenced and grouped by commonalities, rather than physical restraints as before, and these commonalities are often influenced by interest or cause (Edmunds & Turner, 2005).

Social media platforms have become a natural extension of these digital communities, by expanding the sense of the members' agency and bridging the gap of communication (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Institutions across industries have begun to use these outlets to tap into the heart of these communities through both analytics and individual community members, also known as influencers. Using both data and influencers as representative of target audiences' wants and needs, institutions are able to create brand relationships (Booth & Matic, 2011). Although social causes are not selling a brand or product in the strictest sense, they often benefit from the same use of social media analytics and influencers to understand the wants and needs of the individuals they hope to enlist in their cause or goal.

As seen with many political movements in recent years, including the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and Occupy Wall Street, social media have played an important role in creating momentum behind a specific cause. This is accomplished mainly through digital technologies, especially social media, by not only expanding communications, but also providing individual members agency – an opportunity to have their opinions heard and their actions witnessed – and easy access for the organizations themselves to connect and collaborate with these individuals in a larger collective (Bennet, 2012). This process provides both amplification of the individuals' stories and the organization's causes.

Additionally, social media platforms, even in their earliest form such as forums and blogs, have become key links in what is known as “the strength of weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973). This sociological framework states that a single close-knit community's individual members are connected by a macro-level commonality, cause, or interest. But, the framework also suggests these macro-level communities are equally interconnected with each other through weak ties – micro-level commonalities, causes, or interests shared between individuals within separate communities. The framework indicates that influencers within separate communities can create much larger, interconnected audiences between digital communities through the weak ties they share. This becomes one of the more subtly powerful roles of social media: to create connections and interactions between a broad spectrum of digital communities that may have not otherwise associated. Although strong-tie connections within a single community may bond its members together more tightly than weak-tie connections between groups, weak

ties between these groups are more numerous and provide a greater role in sharing and proliferating information, creative content, and other communications (Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, & Adamic, 2012).

Social media as collaborative platforms

Social media platforms also play a vital role in the content creator-audience relationship. Media audiences now use their agency to not only voice opinions, wants, or needs, but also to create alongside, and often with, the entity for which they are an audience. For example, it is common for television shows to have companion websites or applications that allow the audience to create dialogue, contribute information, further interact with existing content, and occasionally even create content of their own related to the show. If a content creator doesn't provide these provisions, the audience often creates these ecosystems themselves through various social media and digital media outlets. In the entertainment industry, this process of interaction between creator and audience is often known as breaching the fourth wall (Griff, 2014).

Breaching the fourth wall indicates that the role between audience and creator is extremely blurred. Usually, the key distinction between the audience and creator is that the creator has ultimate control over the content and any interactions with the content. But social media platforms have made this curation difficult over the years, shifting the power of control to the audience (Stephens, & Lundy, 2012).

Because of this, social media have become a crucial tool for creators to not only market and communicate with their audience, but to ultimately co-create with them. Co-creation has been found to be an extremely powerful tool in instilling a feeling of investment within an audience. The agency created through co-creation between creators and audiences has become extremely important in ensuring the success of any content (Tham, 2009).

Using social media to create a dialogue through UGC

This secondary content that the audience co-creates becomes equally as important as the primary content. This secondary content is often referred to as user-generated content (UGC).

UGC is media created by an audience, whether together or individually, in response to a larger conversation, organization, product, or entity. A popular example used to

explain UGC is fan-fiction, which are short stories that build on the story arcs, characters, or other elements of previously created content, such as a book, movie, or piece of art. UGC can take shape in any media form, including reaction YouTube videos, parody Amazon reviews, and derivative art, as long as it is in response to pre-existing content (Jenkins, 2006).

UGC emerged as a mainstream term in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but has arguably existed since the 1970s and 1980s. Social media and UGC were products of the phenomenon known as Web 2.0, which was a shift in thinking on the purpose of the Internet: that the web should be reciprocal, with both audiences and content creators creating, sharing, and interacting nearly simultaneously. The key concept from the idea of Web 2.0 that influenced the creation of social media and UGC is that the audience member is no longer a passive consumer, but rather an active contributor (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

Social media platforms have developed as a natural place to publish and share UGC within and between larger digital communities. The development of social media as a natural co-creating platform was influenced by many factors, but primarily include its ease of use – functionally and monetarily – its proliferation across diverse communities, and its sociological and psychological incentives. This perhaps inadvertent utilitarian view of social media, caused by the role shift between audience and creator, additionally creates a more multi-faceted and reciprocal dialogue in the broader discussion of culture, power, politics, and other socio-cultural issues (Dijck, 2008).

Social Media in the Blue Roots Project

At the time of writing, the Blue Roots Project was in its building and testing phase. A full launch of the project occurred March 22, 2017, during World Water Day. During its preliminary phase, creating a social media ecosystem for the project was essential to launch within an international scope on March 22. The following social media strategy was deployed from January through March 2017 before the launch on World Water Day.

1. Establish a brand presence and mission through systemized social media posts.
2. Connect with established digital communities to promote the project in the water sphere by using Circle of Blue's previously established connections with water organizations.

3. Collaborate with water space organizations and influencers on their own UGC to get them invested in the BRP mission and to onboard their audience to the BRP.
4. Establish a co-creative social media environment by having organizations and influencers elicit UGC from their own audiences and connecting these audiences using the strength of weak-ties framework through hashtags, such as #myblueroots.
5. Integrate UGC as the primary content of the BRP by highlighting, sharing, and discussing audience submissions alongside BRP original content to highlight the symbiotic and collaborative nature between the project creators and its audience.

Discussion

At the end of the Blue Roots Project campaign, which occurred between March 22, 2017 to May 2017 and culminated at the Watershed Conference in Rome, the project engaged over 250,000 audience members across 33 countries, built a live conference viewership of 36,000, collected 500 UGC submissions, and collaborated with 48 international influencers and organizations within the water space over approximately three months. Analytically, the project was a success. But even more importantly, the project connected international audiences across socioeconomic and geographic divides through personal storytelling about the importance of freshwater through digital communities.

Social good organizations, non-profits, and community-impact organizations like the BRP and Circle of Blue can benefit tremendously from creating and fostering digital communities that access the more intricate roles of social media platforms. By linking organizations and audiences through the weak-ties frameworks, creating agency and investment through UGC, and breaking down fourth walls between creators and audience, social good organizations can become more effective and engaged with their current audiences, better at expanding into newer audiences, and more efficient at achieving qualitative benchmarks that help achieve their organization goals.

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