

Bridging Between Organizations and the Public: Volunteer Coordinators' Uneasy Relationship with Social Computing

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ABSTRACT

We present the results of a qualitative study of the use of social computing technologies by volunteer coordinators at nonprofit organizations. The work of volunteer coordinators is bridge-building work—bringing together numerous public constituencies as well as constituencies within their organizations. One might expect this class of work to be well supported by social software, some of which has been found to enable bridging social capital. However, we find that, in many ways, this class of technology fails to adequately support volunteer coordinators' bridge-building work. We discuss a number of strategies for bridge-building via social computing technologies, numerous challenges faced by volunteer coordinators in their use of these technologies, and opportunities for designing social software to better support bridge-building between organizations and the public.

Author Keywords

Nonprofit, NPO, social computing, volunteer coordination

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3. [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Group and Organization Interfaces—Collaborative Computing

General Terms

Design, Human Factors

INTRODUCTION

In the design and deployment of information technology, we often create distinctions between technologies in various sectors or for various constituencies. There are, for example, public social media (e.g., Twitter or Facebook) and there are enterprise social media (e.g., Yammer or SocialText). In many cases, these distinctions make sense; the computational needs of different constituencies are sometimes substantially different.

The tendency for technology to be designed in ways that often reify these constituency-based divides is exemplified by the intensive research efforts that are undertaken in order to make technology useful across these kinds of divides.

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Drawing inspiration from the impact of social computing technologies in the public sphere, researchers have explored the value of tailoring and deploying social software within the enterprise, as well (e.g., [4]). Other researchers, after observing the public's use of social computing in times of crisis, have begun exploring ways to make these grassroots efforts more accessible to relief organizations [19]. In the first example, researchers are *transposing* technology from one side of a public-organizational divide to the other. In the second example, researchers are creating sociotechnical strategies for *translating* information from one side of the public-organizational divide to the other. In both cases, there is a great deal of work involved in making the technology useful across sectors.

Other researchers have highlighted sociotechnical practices that seem to be *blurring boundaries* between contexts and constituencies, such as bloggers who post publicly about their work [5]. Understanding the ways that people are blurring boundaries or otherwise bridging between contexts or constituencies—whether successfully or not—can help us to better understand the ways that the design of technology may both help and hinder these practices.

One class of work that necessarily spans constituencies and sectors is the work of volunteer coordination [2]. Volunteer coordinators forge connections between the many constituencies who volunteer for nonprofits—including individual volunteers, corporate volunteer programs, educational co-op programs, and Department of Corrections placement services—and their many colleagues within the organization who work with volunteers. The work of volunteer coordination is largely about “trying to figure out what all the connections are. You sort of become this bridge-builder” (O2¹).

Prior research has found that some social computing technologies enable bridging social capital [7]. However, in this research, we find numerous tensions and disconnects between the bridge-building work of volunteer coordinators and the current class of social computing technologies. Here, we ask why a class of technology that fosters

¹ We refer to each of our participants based on the domain of work undertaken by their nonprofit organization [16]. For example, youth development nonprofits have a domain code that begins with the letter “O.” Participants within the same domain are differentiated numerically (e.g., O1 and O2).

bridging social capital does not support the forms of bridge-building work practiced by volunteer coordinators. We unpack numerous tensions and disconnects between volunteer coordinators' work practices and existing social software. We discuss, more generally, the ways that social computing technologies currently fail to bridge between nonprofit organizations and the general public and present opportunities for designing social software to better support this bridge-building work.

RELATED WORK

Research suggests that social computing technologies are, indeed, useful for bridge-building work. Social network sites, in particular, enable *bridging social capital* [7]—the bringing together of heterogeneous groups [17]. These sites enable interaction among diverse constituencies with a range of beliefs and experiences [20]. Our analysis of related work suggests three strategies that are employed when attempting to bridge between sectors via social software: *transposition, blurring, and translation*.

The value of social network sites outside of organizations has prompted researchers to explore their value within organizations, as well. Research has typically focused on the use of enterprise social network sites, social computing technologies *transposed* for the organizational context. Use of enterprise social network sites has been found to correlate with interest in meeting new colleagues, maintaining and building stronger bonds with existing colleagues, a willingness to contribute to the organization and an ability to identify sources of expertise within the organization [4, 20]. Similar social benefits also motivate the use of other enterprise social computing technologies such as workplace blogging and microblogging [6, 10].

In addition to social benefits, enterprise social computing technologies have informational benefits, as well [6, 10]. Microblog posts providing informational content, for example, were found to be more common than personal status updates [6]. However, researchers do note that the pervasive use of broadcast-style posts (as opposed to posts targeted at specific individuals or subgroups) does limit the collaborative value of such software.

Not all social computing technologies used in organizational contexts exist entirely behind corporate firewalls. However, the use of internal, enterprise versions of these technologies differs from the use of publicly available versions of these systems [4, 5, 18], a scenario in which the challenges of bridging between contexts become more apparent. Boundaries between social networks are *blurred* in collaborative work; teams are often comprised of members drawn along the lines of personal social networks rather than structures defined by the organization [15]. Participants in social network sites identified tensions related to the conflation of their personal and professional identities in the presence of overlapping personal and professional social networks; yet, these same participants also wanted to be able to import personal connections into

enterprise social network sites [18]. Work-related bloggers struggled to agree upon or even determine for themselves what can and should be written and where to draw the line between confidentiality and publishability [5].

In lieu of tailoring social computing technologies and transposing them into the organizational setting, other researchers have bridged the public-organizational divide by encouraging intermediaries to serve as *translators*. Reformatting tweets written by members of the public during times of crisis, for example, allows for more systematic filtering and classification; this translation work better supports the work of relief organizations [19].

Often, however, enterprise acceptance of a new technology lags behind public use [18]. Nonprofit organizations have been even slower to adapt to new technologies, despite being particularly reliant on the kind of public engagement that these technologies can enable [1]. Numerous researchers have attributed the slow adoption by nonprofits to various characteristics of the nonprofit context—the significant constraints in financial and technological resources, the ways that volunteers change the dynamic of the organization and influence technology use, and the underutilization of technology when NPOs do not see a connection between technology use and their underlying mission or values (e.g., [12, 13, 14, 21]).

When nonprofits use social computing technologies, they most commonly use them to fundraise [8, 11] and to advocate for the organization and its cause [22]. They have not generally taken advantage of the interactive, dialogic nature of social computing technologies, instead, using them primarily for one-way communication [9, 11, 22]. These significant limitations in use are particularly striking given many nonprofits' reliance on building relationships with volunteers, donors, and advocates and, more generally, encouraging democratic participation [1, 11].

METHOD

Participants

We recruited 23 participants (22 female) who were responsible for managing volunteers in nonprofit organizations. For some participants, the work of volunteer coordination comprised their full-time jobs. Some participants undertook this work alongside other responsibilities within the organization. Other participants were volunteers, themselves, and took on the work in retirement or in addition to another full-time, paying job.

We recruited participants in three different metropolitan areas in the Western United States, primarily via snowball sampling. We also advertised the research at a volunteer recruitment fair on a university campus. We continued recruiting participants until we had achieved data saturation regarding both the use and non-use of technology as well as sampling breadth along two dimensions: the size of the volunteer program and the domain of the nonprofit. Participants represented volunteer programs along a

continuum from those just starting to recruit volunteers to those managing established programs with ~2300 volunteers. Participants also represented seven of nine major classes of nonprofits, including arts, education, environment, health, human services, foreign affairs, and public benefit (e.g., community service clubs) [16].

Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews using a protocol designed around the following areas of interest:

- The background of the organization, its mission, and the ways that the interviewee believed her work and the work of the volunteers contributed to this mission;
- The background of the interviewee, how she came to work in volunteer management, and whether she had received any formal training for her work;
- The nature of the work undertaken by the interviewee, with an emphasis on coordination work both within and outside of the organization; and
- The role of digital and analog technologies in her work.

During the interview, we also asked participants to sketch their social networks. We prompted participants to indicate specific information interdependencies with other individuals or groups as well as the technologies used to communicate or coordinate with each.

Interviews lasted 60 minutes, on average. We conducted all interviews singly or in teams of two, and all researchers used the same interview protocol. Researchers met weekly while collecting data to discuss the interview data and to revisit the protocol, where necessary, in light of each new interview. We interleaved data collection and data analysis.

Data Analysis

The research team collaboratively analyzed each interview transcript. We identified two broad classes of technology in our initial analysis, each associated with a distinct set of issues and challenges for the field of human-computer interaction. The first class of technology included databases and personal information management tools (e.g., Microsoft Outlook and Excel) that had been appropriated for organizational use. An analysis of the information management strategies of and use of these systems by volunteer coordinators was discussed in a previous publication [21]. The second class of technology included a variety of social computing technologies—both those that are marketed to the general public and appropriated by volunteer coordinators (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) as well as third-party social computing applications that have been developed specifically for nonprofits and volunteer coordination (e.g., VolunteerMatch). The set of interview data pertaining to this second class of technology was analyzed independently for this paper.

Using inductive qualitative methods [3], we iteratively developed a coding scheme related to participants' use of social computing technologies. Our initial set of codes related to the ways that social computing technologies were

used by various parties within the nonprofit (as reported by volunteer coordinators), including barriers to use, preferences about ideal use, and trends in volunteering that influenced the use (or lack of use) of these systems. Subsequent iterations of the coding scheme helped to connect broader trends in volunteering with specific instances of, barriers to, and preferences toward system use. Our final iteration of the coding scheme helped us relate these connections to larger patterns of bridge-building (or lack thereof) between the public and organizations.

THE BRIDGE-BUILDING WORK PRACTICES OF VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS

The bridge-building work of volunteer coordination is communication-intensive. A number of volunteer coordinators reported that they process more email and voicemail than anyone else in their organization. Volunteer coordinators field inquiries from potential volunteers, develop communication mechanisms to recruit additional volunteers, conduct orientation and training sessions for incoming volunteers, coordinate with volunteers to schedule and place them with a particular program or department, maintain records to track volunteer service, and work to retain and engage volunteers over long periods of time—by following up with volunteers about their experiences, recognizing them for their work, helping them to feel part of the organization, and trying to build a sense of community among volunteers. They develop and communicate policies about the use of volunteers within the organization, brainstorm with colleagues to develop positions that would be amenable to the work of volunteers, and follow up with colleagues about the volunteers with whom they work.

Because volunteer coordination is fundamentally about bridge-building, we would expect volunteer coordinators to be ideal candidates for using social computing technologies [1, 11]. Volunteer coordinators, themselves, have imagined that this class of technology ought to be useful, as well; although, as we will see, the anticipated usefulness often doesn't play out in reality:

I don't think it's quite the success that I was thinking about.... When they first did it, I was like, 'Oh, that's a great idea.' But then, somehow it's not (A2).

OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL COMPUTING TECHNOLOGIES

In our research, we found that volunteer coordinators use a variety of social computing technologies. Some of these technologies are marketed to the general public and appropriated within nonprofits; others are marketed specifically to nonprofits or volunteer coordinators.

Social Computing Technologies Marketed to the Public and Used by Nonprofits or Volunteer Coordinators

Many volunteer coordinators reported that their nonprofit had a *Facebook* page, although far fewer volunteer coordinators talked about using the site in the course of their own work. Volunteer coordinators reported that their organizations used Facebook in a variety of ways—from fundraising and publicizing events to recruiting new

volunteers or giving “shout-outs” and recognition to people or organizations that worked with the nonprofit. Nearly all of the all of the reported uses of Facebook involved bulletin-board style posting, typically by a “point person” within the organization who served as a *translator*, responsible for aggregating and maintaining the nonprofit’s Facebook content. The only instance in which a volunteer coordinator specifically noted more interaction with the public via Facebook was when a volunteer coordinator at a housing and shelter nonprofit rallied her organization’s Facebook fans to vote for the organization’s entry in a contest sponsored by a local merchant.

Relatively few volunteer coordinators reported any use of *Twitter* within their organization. Those who did reported uses that were similar to that of Facebook—fundraising, event advertisement, and recognizing volunteers for their work. The volunteer coordinator who competed in the Facebook contest also uses her personal Twitter feed to post pictures of things that are for sale in the nonprofit’s store—*blurring boundaries* between personal and work contexts.

Almost all of the volunteer coordinators that we interviewed worked at organizations with *websites*, a few of which had some social computing features such as *blogs* that are used to advertise upcoming events or share pictures of recent volunteer activity. All of the volunteer coordinators that we interviewed used *email* extensively; a few of them took advantage of email marketing services like *MailChimp* and *ConstantContact*. One volunteer coordinator reported using *SurveyMonkey* to get feedback from volunteers about how to improve the program.

Social Computing Technologies Marketed Specifically to Nonprofits and Volunteer Coordinators

One of the most frequently mentioned third-party websites in our interviews was *VolunteerMatch*, although not all who mentioned it were currently using the technology. Volunteer coordinators used the site to list specific volunteer opportunities at their organization—either for a select subset of ongoing opportunities or short-term events. Using *VolunteerMatch*, prospective volunteers can search for opportunities by geographic area and/or area of interest.

In addition to helping advertise volunteer opportunities, *VolunteerMatch* also enables volunteer coordinators to generate various reports about volunteers who have worked with the organization:

It pulls it all together for me... I have all of [the volunteers’] emails, what all they’ve ever done for us, when they’ve applied for us. And so, as a new membership year comes I can do a sort of mass email to individuals who have worked in different areas, and say, we have more opportunities like this and, you know, are you interested, kind of thing (O2).

Other similar public–nonprofit matching websites mentioned less frequently in interviews included *Serve.gov*, *HandsOnNetwork.org*, and *Mentoring.org*.

Only one of the volunteer coordinators in our study (L1) mentioned a technology marketed specifically to nonprofits that was not a public–nonprofit matching service. Her organization had recently decided to adopt *NetCommunity*, a content management system featuring “interactive website management” as well as integrated “Web 2.0 and social networking²”—an example of social computing that has been *transposed* into the nonprofit context.

While most volunteer coordinators reported using social computing technologies to some degree, many felt like they weren’t using these technologies as much as they “should.” Nearly all volunteer coordinators articulated significant disconnects between social computing technologies and their work—disconnects that often limited the use of these technologies in practice.

CHALLENGES IN THE USE OF SOCIAL COMPUTING TECHNOLOGIES

We have identified three challenges faced by volunteer coordinators in their use of social computing technologies: coordination overhead with organizational point persons and gatekeepers; a mismatch between the focus of third party design and the needs of volunteer coordinators; and the undesirable outcomes of using public, “all-call” media.

Coordination Overhead with Organizational Point Persons and Gatekeepers

Volunteer coordinators reported that people serving a variety of different capacities within their organizations act as the social media “point person,” including individuals in fundraising and development, marketing, communications, public or community relations, and volunteer coordination. In one organization, the role of social media point person is delegated to a rotating slate of interns. The role of this point person influences the ways that social media is used across the organization. When someone from fundraising and development is in charge of the organization’s social media account, for example, the focus of posts tended towards providing visible recognition of the activities of large corporate sponsors:

Our fundraiser person... I coordinate with her, “Hey, we have a new group coming in. It will be nice to give them, you know, a little shout out on Facebook or something.” So, then she’ll come and take their pictures and write a blurb, you know, “Bank of America was here” with smiley faces or whatever (K1).

Volunteer coordinators reported a variety of different tenors of relationships with the social media point person. In some instances, as in the example above, the volunteer coordinator has a collaborative working relationship with the point person and is able to suggest and contribute content that reflects her own sphere of activity with volunteers. In other cases, the relationship between the volunteer coordinator and the point person is not as collaborative and, as a result, the organization’s social

² www.blackbaud.com/netcommunity/

media presence rarely reflects the sphere of activity of the volunteer coordinator:

We are growing in our use for, you know, social networking and how that works. So right now there is not a strong relationship between marketing and—like, so if I have a volunteer position that goes out I do my e-update. I don't usually contact [marketing] to say, "Hey, can you Twitter this..." I wish we had a stronger relationship there.... We're not working as well as we could together (P1).

The degree to which the social media point person functions as a gatekeeper, vetting content and *translating* it into an organizationally approved form before it is posted, also varies across organizations. In some instances, volunteer coordinators reported submitting content for editing and approval. In other instances, the point person drafts content about volunteers within the organization and sends it to the volunteer coordinator for approval before posting that content publicly.

Some volunteer coordinators reported that the social media point person, webmaster, or IT department are additionally responsible for making decisions about which social computing technologies will be adopted by the organization. The rationale for particular choices and/or the anticipated role for and benefit of those technologies are not always communicated across the organization. In one housing and shelter nonprofit, for example, the volunteer coordinator reported that the organization's "web team" had decided to use a new technology called NetCommunity, but she wasn't really sure what it does, why it was adopted or how it would impact her work:

We have a new website and it has a NetCommunity now.... So, I believe—I'm not exactly sure how it's going to work so I think I'm learning that today or tomorrow, but {laughter} we can email through Net Community (L1).

In contrast to the sometimes-prohibitive intra-organizational coordination required to make use of nonprofits' "official" social media accounts, many volunteer coordinators use personal social media accounts for work purposes, *blurring* the boundaries between their personal and work social networks. In addition to requiring less coordination overhead, volunteer coordinators reported that by using their personal accounts, they are better able to leverage their personal social network as a way to build up a social network on the organization's behalf: "... you just send out to as many friends and then you ask them to send out to their friends. So, it just—it forms a chain" (G1).

Mismatch Between the Focus of Third Party Design and the Needs of Volunteer Coordinators

There are numerous facets of volunteer coordinators' work that could be supported by new technologies. Yet, the one activity for which third-party vendors are creating new systems is the one activity that volunteer coordinators repeatedly told us was not something they needed to focus on—volunteer recruitment. This class of technology is intended to match members of the public with volunteer opportunities that have been posted online, and incorporates

facets of expertise-matching systems *transposed* from the intra-organizational context to use that spans public-nonprofit constituencies. While many volunteer coordinators are familiar with these systems, had used them previously, or were currently using them to a limited extent, there was an overwhelming sentiment that support for recruiting was not a key need. The number of volunteers who initiated contact with volunteer coordinators about potential opportunities through other venues was sufficient to keep their programs running:

When there is an earthquake... [there are] also a lot of calls. So, you know, there's a lot of natural ways... that we need no recruitment for (P1).

In terms of recruitment, I mean, we have a lot of people who just contact us. You know, people have labeled that [we are] like the Starbucks of the nonprofit industry. Everybody, when you say Starbucks, everybody knows what the heck it is. When you say [the name of our organization], everybody knows what it is.... When they're looking to volunteer, a lot of times they come to us first, which is great. So we get a steady flow of volunteers (L2).

Many participants do not work for nonprofits that would elicit quite this level of name recognition, but the lack of need to focus on recruiting was consistent across domains and sizes of organizations.

While public-nonprofit matching websites were the most commonly mentioned class of social computing technology in our data, only one volunteer coordinator—who was only using the site to recruit for a very specific and intentionally selected subset of her volunteer opportunities—expressed any enthusiasm for these technologies. More commonly, volunteer coordinators talked about other needs that were more pressing—engaging with volunteers, fostering community among volunteers, and recruiting from targeted demographics. All of these needs present compelling social computing design opportunities, which we will discuss in more detail later. Nonetheless, volunteer coordinators felt compelled to use—or at least try—existing technologies, in large part because they believed that a critical mass of their volunteer or potential volunteer audience is present online, and that these sites seemed to be the most likely place to connect with them. In doing so, however, they struggled with a further mismatch between the public, "all call" style of these sites and the recruiting needs of their organizations.

Undesirable Outcomes of Using Public, "All-Call" Media

Most social computing use described by volunteer coordinators reflected a public, "all-call" style of use, whether posts to social media accounts or volunteer opportunity listings on public-nonprofit matching websites. Volunteer coordinators who had used social computing technologies, particularly for advertising volunteer opportunities, described them as "sit[ting] out there and do[ing] their thing" (E1). Once a volunteer opportunity was publicly posted, it could persist for months and bring in any number of new volunteers at any time. The public nature of these types of systems, particularly the mass-scale,

broadcast-style recruiting that they tend to support, presented a number of problems for volunteer coordinators.

If We Use It, They Will Come: Having Too Many Volunteers is Worse Than Not Having Enough

Many volunteer coordinators believed that mass all-calls for volunteers would cause them to be “flooded” with too many volunteers. Overwhelmingly, they believed that “it doesn’t really work to do an all-call for volunteers” (O2). Having too many volunteers and not having enough volunteer work was perceived to be worse than not having enough volunteers. In this way, existing public–nonprofit matching sites can create problematic situations for volunteer coordinators:

The thing that I’ve learned, most importantly, is if a volunteer comes down they have to do something.... If they just sit around and they don’t have anything to do, then the resentment builds and they leave. And then they share that in the community: “Yes, I used to volunteer for [that nonprofit]. They didn’t need my time and talent and I’m not going to support them anymore” (P2).

One of the more time-consuming aspects of the work of volunteer coordinators is envisioning opportunities and planning for the work of volunteers:

[We recruited] 250 people here to do a day for us. But it took us three months for the people to prepare for the day when the volunteers would come. That takes a lot of time from an organization... yet you don't want to say no (P4).

Volunteer coordinators have to balance the number of incoming volunteers with the amount of time they have to prepare for volunteers. And most volunteer coordinators were concerned about the “all-call” nature of social computing technologies upsetting that balance.

Losing Control of the Process: The Politics of Volunteer Assignments

Along with the belief that using public social computing technologies for recruiting would result in being “flooded” with new volunteers, volunteer coordinators also expressed concerns about losing some critical control over the volunteer recruiting and scheduling process.

At a practical level, some nonprofits need to retain fine-grained control over volunteer scheduling because they give priority to partner and large donor organizations. A volunteer coordinator at a food and nutrition nonprofit reported, for example, “one church gets first priority... [because] we need that income.... It would be hard to do a web-based [system] where just anybody goes and signs up” (K1). The volunteer coordinator at a housing and shelter nonprofit has similar constraints and works around them by using web-based recruiting only to fill in the gaps after priority volunteer scheduling had been finalized on paper:

So our primary [process] is to get the construction groups and the donor groups and the church groups and all of that in the schedule and then we open it up. Any extra individuals can go in there (L1).

Even with existing volunteers, volunteer coordinators prefer to have control over which volunteers are scheduled for

specific tasks. For example, the volunteer coordinator at an arts and humanities nonprofit does some targeted scheduling: “If it’s a specific event where I only need a couple people, I... know who I would like to ask” (A2).

In addition, many volunteer coordinators have fairly extensive application processes for new volunteers—including orientation, training, and sometimes interviews and background checks. All-call style recruiting that “sits out there” for potential volunteers to step up at any time tends not to match existing work processes.

Working with third party sites to carry out public, web-based recruiting also places new expectations on volunteer coordinators, changing the timelines of existing recruiting processes and creating additional pragmatic challenges for volunteer coordinators who are already pressed for time:

[When participating in the HandsOn Network recruiting drive], the volunteer signs up and is told about what organizations are in their zip code. And then the organization has to respond within 24 hours—can you believe it?—to the volunteer! I did not want to be a part of it, because you would get all of these volunteers flooded to you... and you have to respond to them right away, and you don't get to meet them before they do the event (A2).

Compromising the Quality of Volunteers: Concerns about Engagement and Investment

Closely related to these practical concerns of having too many volunteers or losing control over recruiting and scheduling processes is a third, more qualitative concern. Many volunteer coordinators believe that all-call recruiting is too broad-based and does not help them target individuals who are truly invested in the mission of the organization:

Somebody will write [via a matching site] and say, “Hey, you know, this sounds really interesting. I’d love to work with kids outdoors. Here’s my number and my email.” And, you know, within hours, you know, I email them back. And, okay, the email doesn’t work. And then I try the phone number and the phone number doesn’t work. It’s like, okay were you really serious about being interested? (C2).

In contrast, volunteer coordinators report that the volunteers they recruit through traditional methods—methods that rely upon more situated connections either to existing volunteers’ social networks or to the ongoing activities of the nonprofit (e.g., recruiting volunteers from among an organization’s patrons)—are more likely to be committed to the nonprofit, and, thus, more likely to engage regularly and over the long-term. In many cases, volunteers make up half or more of a nonprofit’s staff, so volunteer coordinators are not looking for just any volunteers—they need the *right* volunteers. If volunteers aren’t committed to the organization, don’t support its mission, or aren’t willing and able to engage with the nonprofit on a sustained basis, volunteer coordinators believe that the work of the organization could suffer.

Volunteer coordinators express skepticism that volunteers who find an organization through sites like VolunteerMatch would do any more than volunteer at one-off events or for a

short period of time. For example, a volunteer coordinator at a youth development nonprofit recounted her experience recruiting through a HandsOn Network event: “We had a couple of hundred people come through here... but I don't know if we'll see those people again or not” (O2).

Although some volunteer coordinators are able to make use of these episodic volunteers in specific ways, most volunteer coordinators generally find committed, long-term volunteers to be more valuable to the organization and to engender more meaningful experiences for clients:

What our kids more than anything need is to know that every Monday those same people are going to come and show up... (P4).

VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT PRIORITIES AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR DESIGN

Despite these difficulties in using existing social computing technologies, there are a number of volunteer management priorities that could be supported by this class of technology. Understanding the priorities of volunteer coordinators and, in particular, the kinds of work that they feel is under-supported by current technologies can help us better understand the design opportunities in this space.

Promoting Deeper Engagement with Current Volunteers

One of the most commonly discussed priorities of volunteer coordinators is maintaining meaningful connections with current volunteers—providing them an “opportunity to connect with their passion... bring their whole selves to that work” (O2) and finding ways to increase their level of engagement with the mission of the organization:

The goal isn't to have more volunteers at this point; the goal is more to have a higher service-hour average per volunteer because that's going to signify that... they're having a meaningful experience and that their contribution is more meaningful (D2).

Currently, interaction with volunteers either happens face-to-face—in limited, often serendipitous contexts—or through mass emails, used to keep volunteers updated about additional organizational needs and volunteer opportunities:

Again, recruitment's not our issue. [The e-update] does ensure that our volunteers who we do have know that they are needed... (P1).

It allows you to e-blast a regular list... and so they get information about, you know, volunteer opportunities outside of what their core responsibility is... (A2).

Only one of the volunteer coordinators in our study reported using technology to send out more targeted communication to subgroups of volunteers based on records of their previous volunteer experience. In this case, all of the organization's episodic volunteer opportunities were managed through VolunteerMatch and the database of that system (which stored volunteer email addresses and data about who had volunteered for what opportunities) was integrated with mass communication features. Nearly all other volunteer coordinators used separate systems for maintaining volunteer contact information and information

about who had volunteered for which opportunities. If information management systems were integrated with communication and social computing technologies, volunteer coordinators' ability to engage in strategic and targeted ways with current volunteers could be improved.

Fostering Community Among Current Volunteers

In addition to building stronger connections between their volunteers and the work of the organization, volunteer coordinators frequently spoke of wanting to foster a stronger sense of community among their volunteers. They want volunteers who work for different programs within the organization to get to know each other better and to provide support and recognition for each other's work:

I wish we were a little bit more creative with... ways that we can help volunteers through technology—help them affirm one another. You know, where they are able to put things... on Facebook... where it's not just us affirming but other volunteers affirming other volunteers as part of the recognition piece (P1).

Most volunteer coordinators we interviewed use their organizational email or an email marketing service to communicate with volunteers, but these media don't afford the community building that volunteer coordinators want. One volunteer coordinator who wanted to bring together volunteers working in different departments only communicated with volunteers via email. However, email doesn't provide a good way for her to help volunteers get to know each other, in part because of privacy concerns raised by making email addresses visible:

Every time I do an email to the volunteers, I blind copy. There have been concerns from volunteers expressed about their email getting put on other lists if it's visible. So we don't have... anything set up for them (C2).

Social computing technologies can facilitate both communication and community-building, but additional design work is needed to give volunteers and volunteer coordinators better control over the shape and extent of the virtual relationships embodied in these tools.

Reaching out to New Demographics of Volunteers

When volunteer coordinators *are* concerned with recruiting new volunteers, they are most often concerned with reaching out very specifically to new demographics of volunteers and trying to find ways to engage them with the organization: “We're trying to figure out how we could do more targeted outreach to really reach the people that we're not really reaching” (C2). Desires to engage with new demographics of volunteers generally emerged based on either feedback from clients (e.g., clients of a youth development nonprofit requested more college-aged mentors), or based on organizational priorities at the national level (e.g., an organization-wide effort to recruit more client-alumni as volunteers).

When targeting new demographics of volunteers, volunteer coordinators wrestled with two related issues: (1) what sort of media they should use to reach their target audience and

(2) what kind of volunteer opportunities would appeal to these new demographics of potential volunteers.

The first challenge—not knowing what media are best for connecting with specific demographics—points to a lack of visibility about the audiences of various media, including those media that volunteer coordinators already use. For example, one volunteer coordinator who actively uses multiple forms of social media admitted that she only knew a “handful” of the people who were fans of the nonprofit on Facebook (L2). Instead of communicative interactions being experienced as situated within a known social network, the use of these systems appears to occur within a much more anonymous and asocial network. When using existing social media, there is a lack of visibility—of who these fans or followers are, of what their interest in the organization is, and of what kind of connections they may or may not have or want to have with the organization. This lack of visibility may be one factor contributing to the use of these systems more for mass, unidirectional, broadcast communications than for interactive, community-building, even though these systems might have those capabilities.

The second challenge of knowing what kinds of volunteer opportunities would appeal to members of new target demographics arose most commonly in the context of discussing generational trends in volunteering. In the past, volunteer coordinators reflected that they were able to rely on the time and talents of an entire generation of highly dedicated volunteers:

Anybody who was born in the 30s or 40s or even the 50s, you had that, “Volunteering is what we do...” [Now], you just don't have that group of women who have the flexibility to come to volunteer and really be there and do volunteering. (P4).

Volunteer coordinators reported needing to rethink strategies for reaching out to and accommodating younger generations of volunteers:

But what we've learned is that a lot of our strategy was around looking for volunteers who could work long-term with us, so most of our positions are a year commitment. And that doesn't always work for people. The world's changed so much (O2).

One common observation was that younger generations “want to be engaged but they just don't have that kind of time any more...” (O2). Volunteer coordinators expressed concern that individuals in younger generations may not understand what it means to be a volunteer:

There are many folks that have no concept of what a volunteer is.... They haven't grown up with it. It's not part of their lives.... Are our grandchildren going to... know what it means to be a volunteer? (P4).

These beliefs present a philosophical challenge for volunteer coordinators, most of whom believe that volunteering is an important experience that individuals in younger generations need. Yet, they are also frustrated by the extra work of coordinating episodic volunteering, the lack of volunteer commitment associated with it, and the

lower value of episodic volunteering for the organization's clients. Current social computing technology seems to reinforce the episodic styles of volunteering that volunteer coordinators see as being less meaningful. As one volunteer coordinator at a human services nonprofit generalized, “If you want to reach those younger folks, you Tweet. You are on Facebook” (P4). However, such technologies are also seen primarily as supporting the instant gratification of a short-term experience.

Although social software may be a viable resource for connecting nonprofits to a younger demographic, these technologies might better align with the philosophies and priorities of volunteer coordinators if they were to foster or incentivize longer-term engagement, perhaps by increasing the visibility of the depth or duration of these relationships.

BRIDGING BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS AND THE PUBLIC VIA SOCIAL COMPUTING TECHNOLOGIES

The work of volunteer coordinators is largely about building bridges between the nonprofit and the public. It is highly social, communication-intensive, and situated among a number of social networks extending into and outside of the nonprofit. Volunteer coordinators, in many ways, are positioned to be ideal candidates for the use of social computing technologies and have attempted a number of different strategies for bridging between the public and their organization. They used (or tried to use) social matching software such as VolunteerMatch that had been designed for and *transposed* to the organizational context. They sometimes communicated information about volunteer activities to point persons who *translated* the information into an organizationally-sanctioned form to post on public social media sites. They also *blurred* the boundaries between constituencies by using their personal Facebook or Twitter accounts for organizational purposes.

Although volunteer coordinators tried a variety of strategies for bridging between the public and the organization via social computing technologies, we found more disconnects between this class of technology and the work practices and philosophies of volunteer coordinators than we observed instances of successful adoption. Many of these disconnects occur because social computing technologies fail to bridge—as the work of volunteer coordinators must—between the public and the organization.

Bridging From the Public to the Organization

This research foregrounds a number of ways that social software might be enhanced to help volunteer coordinators connect inward, from the public to the organization.

Volunteer coordinators want to foster community among the many volunteers who could be engaged quite broadly across the organization. This desire presents a challenge for the design of social computing technologies, because volunteer coordinators need to balance conflicting desires for visibility. On the one hand, the technology must provide enough visibility of network members to allow for the

appropriate grouping of followers (e.g., volunteers, donors, staff, and advocates from the general public who often all use the same social software) and to facilitate community building. On the other hand, the technology should allow individuals to control their own level of visibility so that people who want to remain anonymous or who do not wish to be contacted by others can still engage with the community in a way that fits their personal preferences.

In part, volunteer coordinators are reluctant to use social computing technologies to recruit members of the public because there is a lack of awareness of who is “out there” and what their existing or desired relationship to the organization might be. When volunteer coordinators engage in offline recruiting, they have situated information about how a recruit found the organization (e.g., as a patron of the organization or via the social network of an existing volunteer). This information helps volunteer coordinators understand, both literally and figuratively, where the recruit is coming from. Social computing technologies might better support this bridge-building work by providing more situated traces of how an online recruit found the organization—not only the referral mechanisms through which people arrive at a nonprofit’s site, but also how they are already connected to the organization through social networks or how they are affiliated with other organizations that might be relevant to the nonprofit.

One way that some technologies—like VolunteerMatch—are beginning to help bridge from the public to the organization is by making the nonprofit more aware of who has signed up to volunteer for their organization and what opportunities individuals have already or are intending to participate in. While useful for planning and logistical reasons, this information doesn’t fully match the more holistic and strategic needs of the nonprofit:

There’s one disconnect for me... when we come back with these sorts of reports [from VolunteerMatch]... it’s not always easy to get staff to connect that with their strategy. So, okay, here’s what we learned and here’s where some of the volunteer interests lie, and so how do we tie all that together and plan for the next year? (O2).

The data underlying social computing systems are boundary objects that need to support the needs of different constituencies. Exploring the ways that highly structured yet heterogeneous data can be manipulated and visualized by multiple stakeholders would be of value. A particular challenge here would be doing so in ways that support strategic visioning and those kinds of creative work that require high-level synthesis and are several steps removed from low-level queries and report generation.

Bridging From the Organization to the Public

This research also foregrounds a number of ways that social software might be enhanced to help volunteer coordinators connect outward, from the organization to the public.

Existing public–nonprofit matching sites do not generally support organizational philosophies of volunteerism or

allow the organization’s recruiting goals, such as more targeted recruiting, to drive their use of the technology. If organizations were able to lead the process, they would likely need to be able to leverage some of the information that already exists in many social computing sites. Social computing technologies could support organizational priorities by exposing additional metadata and providing ways to filter communication to a more targeted set of people. Such filters could also allow for the staggered release of information so that different subgroups could receive information at different times based on the organization’s political or philosophical needs.

Volunteer coordinators also want to engage more deeply with existing volunteers. One way to do this is to target communication to particular groups. Currently, volunteer coordinators have access to metadata about volunteers via organizational information management systems. However, these systems are not often integrated with communication or social computing technologies. As a result, it is difficult to take advantage of them to engage more deeply with volunteers in desirable ways.

Finally, in the case of nonprofit organizations, there are typically multiple stakeholders who could benefit from having easy access to organizational social media. Although technology that is constructed specifically for organizations is often designed to reflect the varied roles of, relationships among, and goals of different members of the organization, most social media accounts are designed to be used by one person. This leads to a common assumption that there should only be one account per organization, which can lead to the use of point persons or gatekeepers. This arrangement can bias or limit the use of these systems. There is a need for systems that can overlay the kinds of multi-user, multi-function capabilities that allow an organization to provide access to multiple staff members while still allowing the organization to maintain some degree of control over the public face of its message.

CONCLUSION

One sociotechnical trajectory for social computing designed for nonprofits looks toward crowdsourcing for its inspiration—encouraging small contributions from large numbers of individuals to create value. Shortly after concluding our interviews, a new public–nonprofit matching site was launched that takes episodic volunteering to a new extreme. This site, Sparked, works in much the same way as other volunteer matching sites but is for *microvolunteering*, “volunteering that you can do in small bits of time... It’s high-impact, high-efficiency do-gooding.”³ This sociotechnical trajectory, while possibly productive in some domains for some stakeholders, does not align with the philosophy of volunteerism and priorities held by the volunteer coordinators in this study.

³ <https://www.sparked.com/microvolunteering>

This research suggests a need for a different sociotechnical design trajectory, one centered on bridge-building between organizations and the public. In this paper:

- We characterize the work of volunteer coordinators as bridge-building between organizations and the public.
- We identify three strategies for using social computing in bridge-building: *translation*, *transposition*, and *blurring*.
- We describe specific challenges that volunteer coordinators face in using social computing to bridge between the public and their nonprofit organizations.
- We suggest opportunities for better supporting bridge-building in the design of social software.

This alternative design trajectory would shift its focus away from ideas of “high-impact, high-efficiency, do-gooding”—values clearly misaligned with the philosophies and priorities of volunteer coordinators. Instead, this design trajectory might take bridge-building as its inspiration. This design trajectory is about seeing “users” not just in terms of homogenous communities but instead as heterogeneous constituencies spanning sectors. This design trajectory focuses less on task decomposition and more on community re-composition. This design trajectory strives to connect people in ways that are less about supporting one-off, anonymous interactions and more about engaging in dialogue and investing in relationships over the long term.

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