Online Social Good Networks and Their Impact on Nonprofit Organizations and Individuals

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In this ever-changing digital age, nonprofit organizations have increasingly developed an Internet presence in order to further their organizational goals. Social good networks are cause-related social networking sites that have developed as a part of this trend. Some examples of social good networks include Care2.com, NetworkforGood.org, Idealist.org, and the Facebook Causes application. Few studies exist on this fairly new development; therefore, this study aims to look at social good networks from two different perspectives – that of both the non-profits and the users. The goals of this research were to first look at what these sites offer and then determine how and why nonprofits and individuals use them.

In order to study social good networks, the research methodology consisted of a three-part mixed methods approach. First, a content analysis of 30 social good networks was conducted. This involved looking at the features and emerging patterns of the networks in order to better understand and typify the sites. In-depth interviews with seven nonprofits were then held to determine how social good networks fit into the overall communications and marketing strategies of the organizations. An online survey of 70 social good network users was also conducted to further explore individuals’ attitudes and behaviors on the sites.

Content analysis findings show that social good networks have evolved from simple donation and volunteer sites to more sophisticated networks of online civic engagement. The interview results show that nonprofits are using social good networks to reach broader audiences and increase awareness, but they are finding it difficult to convert online support into offline action. Survey participants report using the networks mainly to learn more about causes and recruit others, but they are not necessarily donating more or getting more involved in their local communities as a result of their online involvement. Together, the findings reveal that social good networks are beneficial for nonprofits mostly for their marketing and relationship building capacities, but there is not substantial evidence showing that they are successful tools for increasing donations or volunteer support.