

12-13-2018

Social Media and Development: Understanding NGO practices and perceptions

Anand Sheombar

HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, anand.sheombar@hu.nl

Cathy Urquhart

Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, Manchester Metropolitan University, c.urquhart@mmu.ac.uk

Oliver Kayas

Manchester Metropolitan University, O.Kayas@mmu.ac.uk

Tidings Ndhlovu

Manchester Metropolitan University, T.Ndhlovu@mmu.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aisel.aisnet.org/globdev2018>

Recommended Citation

Sheombar, Anand; Urquhart, Cathy; Kayas, Oliver; and Ndhlovu, Tidings, "Social Media and Development: Understanding NGO practices and perceptions" (2018). *GlobDev 2018*. 3.

<https://aisel.aisnet.org/globdev2018/3>

This material is brought to you by the Proceedings Annual Workshop of the AIS Special Interest Group for ICT in Global Development at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in GlobDev 2018 by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact elibrary@aisnet.org.

Social Media and Development: Understanding NGO practices and perceptions

Anand Sheombar, Hogeschool Utrecht, Utrecht, NL, Anand.Sheombar@hu.nl

Cathy Urquhart, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK, C.Urquhart@mmu.ac.uk

Oliver Kayas, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK, O.Kayas@mmu.ac.uk

Tidings Ndhlovu, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK, T.Ndhlovu@mmu.ac.uk

Paper Category: Research Paper

ABSTRACT

The goal of this study is to identify the perspectives that development NGOs attribute to organisational social media, and furthermore elaborate on an appropriate categorisation of these perspectives for social media use by development NGOs. How social media is used in the area of development, where the use goes far beyond the private sector purpose of publicity and converting a sale, is a key issue for NGOs.

Fourteen development NGOs from the Netherlands that are actively using social media were selected for this study. Interviews were conducted to collect data from the decision makers and practitioners in these organisations. The grounded theory method combined with a multiple case study was applied for data analysis.

The resulting preliminary framework presents us with four emerging perspectives, namely Technological, Individual, Collective and Contextual perspectives attributed to organisational social media use. We theorise that there are relationships between these four perspectives. This paper suggests that the understanding of (organisational) social media use among development NGOs can be better understood by identifying these perspectives and their inter-relationships.

The implications of these findings for the literature on affordances and organisational social media use in the context of development and NGOs are discussed.

Keywords: Social media, organisational social media, nonprofit, NGO, international development, affordances, affordance clusters, affordance ecologies, ICT for development

INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are active players in the field of international development, both as providers of aid and services to underprivileged communities as well as policy advocates (Atack 1999; Clarke 1998). They are recognised as key third sector actors in the landscapes of international development, humanitarian action, human rights, environment and many other areas of public action (Lewis 2010).

What makes a study on organisational media use by development NGOs somewhat different from other studies on organisational media is the context of developing countries in which the development projects of these NGOs take place. Although we should not generalise about development countries, certain characteristics can be identified that may be of influence on (ICT for) development projects (Heeks 2017; Roztocky and Weistroffer 2011): uncertainty because of (political) instability and volatility in systems like supply chains and markets; resource constraints (shorter supply of money, skills, technology); inequality (both in distribution of resources, as well as in power and control); institutional differences because of different language values and cultural norms; and localism which means more reliance on closer ties.

Social media can be seen as one in a long line of ICTs that have been used in this way. How social media is used in the area of development, where in contrast to the private sector the purpose of such social media is not in converting a sale, is a key issue for NGOs (Kanter and Fine 2010; Waters 2009). The usage of social media has increased dramatically (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010), and development organisations are not alone in trying to understand how social media might help them to achieve their objectives. However, for many of these organisations, the benefits or the potential uses of social media in the development context are not entirely clear (Berente et al. 2011). Much research on social media focuses on a Western context and this focus has limited our understanding of social media technologies (Burgess et al. 2017). Studies are also often limited to WEIRD populations, i.e. those residing in Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and developed countries (Henrich et al. 2010). Thompson and Heeks urge for further research including empirical examples of attempts to introduce social media to serve developmental aims (Heeks 2008; Thompson 2008). This study serves as a particular example to that aim.

This brings us to the research question addressed in this paper:

What values do development NGOs attribute to organisational social media?

And furthermore, what might be an appropriate categorisation for these values on social media use by development NGOs?

The approach of the study is to analyse in a conceptual manner without focusing on any particular social media technology or relying too much on today's social media technology. The paper proceeds by firstly addressing the role of the literature in a grounded theory study, then highlighting NGOs' use of social media and the context of development. It then proceeds to combine that literature with the findings of social media use of development NGOs in order to construct a picture of the values attributed to organisational social media.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

As further explained in the Research Method chapter, the grounded theory method that has been used for this study implies that we do not enter the field with particular theories in mind. The mid-range theory developed from our data relates to affordances and affordance clusters. While this literature was linked to the emerging theory only after analysis of the data, we briefly address it here (together with the organisational social media literature) that initially drove our study for the reader's convenience.

Development NGOs and ICTs

One of the most widely used definitions for NGOs is being provided by Operational Directive 14.70 of the World Bank. The World Bank (2014) defines non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as "private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development. NGOs often differ from other organizations in the sense that they tend to operate independent from government, are value-based and are guided by the principles of altruism and voluntarism." Sometimes non-governmental development organisations are referred to as NGDOs, c.f. Makuwira (2013) or when they originate from the northern hemisphere, like the organisations that are subject of this research, NNGOs.

The concept of 'Development' is highly debated and often not clarified in ICT for Development projects (Avgerou 2010; Unwin 2014). It is both value relative, as it has different meanings to different people, depending on what is considered like economic, geographic, political, social,

cultural, religious, ethnic contexts, as well as it is theory relative, as it depends on theories and different academic disciplines about what will lead to progress (Prakash and De 2007; Reddi 2011).

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can be a powerful enabler of development goals, because its unique characteristics improve communication and the exchange of information to strengthen and create new economic and social networks (UNDP 2001). In this context, ICT as an enabler of development is also referred to as ICT for Development (ICT4D or ICTD). ICT for development is aimed at bridging the digital divide and aiding economic development by ensuring equitable access to up-to-date communications technologies (UNDP-APDIP 2004). The term "digital divide" refers to the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities (OECD 2006).

Social media use by development NGOs

More and more development organisations are discovering the power of social media to affect change (Ørecomm 2012). The concept of social media has a technological foundation, it is a social phenomenon, and has overarching principles. For the purpose of this research, social media is defined as a techno-social system for participatory culture, having characteristics like openness, participation, conversation, connectedness and community. This definition relies heavily on the ideas set forward by Fuchs (2013); (Fuchs 2017) and Mayfield (2008) and ideas on organisational uses of social media (Schlagwein and Hu 2017).

Masetti-Zannini (2007, p. 37) argues that NGOs have struggled for a long time to build effective participation mechanisms in the developing world, but "Web 2.0 technologies can give people in the developing world increasing tools to let them speak out for themselves, and seek those development paths that reflect their local realities and meet their aspirations and needs.". He acknowledges the international development NGOs are an important factor, as they possess power by their position in the global development activities. From an organisational perspective, social media profoundly change the manner of online communication towards a dialogue between people inside and outside organisations (Cheung *et al.* 2011). Aitamurto (2011) discusses the changing role of non-profit organisations that is changing from intermediary to a

platform facilitator in a networked organisation. She also argues that non-profit organisations should radically shorten the distance between the donor and the beneficiary (Aitamurto 2011). Ballantyne and Addison (2000) and Ferguson et al. (2013) observe growing online collaboration and knowledge sharing between NGOs. According to Mefalopulos (2008, p. 5) and Servaes (2008) communication between NGOs with the use of social media may be part of a broader set of so called 'Development communication' activities. Bach and Stark (2004) argue that NGOs transform when focusing their activities from brokering information to facilitating knowledge while using interactive technology such as social media. The potential of social media in the context of aid and development covers four broad areas Zuniga and White (2009) and other scholars argue. These are *connecting with others; collaborating with other people; creating and sharing content; and finding, using, organising and reusing content*.

These potentials of social media can be analysed using the concepts of sociomateriality and affordances.

Sociomateriality and affordances

Sociomateriality refers to the inherent inseparability of social and material aspects of organisational activities (Orlikowski and Scott 2008). Furthermore, sociomateriality build on structural approaches to technology use in organisations, showing that technological artifacts are created by social interaction among people and that their effect on organisations are shaped by social interaction (Leonardi 2013a). Affordances are a way to bring sociomateriality into the analysis. Affordances, originally rooted in studies of ecological psychology, were introduced by Gibson (1977), who defined affordance as action possibility (latent) available in the environment and relative to action capabilities of the actor(s). Various scholars argue affordances may emerge from the interaction people have with technologies and that has been shaped by their experimentation and adaption of use of those technologies (Leonardi 2011). Leonardi and Vaast (2016) provide an overview and research agenda on social media and their affordances for organisational use, arguing for example to diversify the inquiry. Many studies of organisational social media use mainly focused on the implications for knowledge sharing. This study attempts to extend that view by looking at all social media activities from development NGOs. Volkoff and Strong (2017) suggest a range of principles for using Affordance Theory in Information Systems (IS) research. A useful principle they suggest is to select an appropriate

level(s) of granularity for the affordances. An elaboration of the affordance concept in the field of Information Systems based on extensive literature review is provided by Stendal et al. (2016): 1) affordances are independent of the individual's ability to recognise them, but exist in relation to the actors and therefore dependent on the actor's capabilities, 2) "every object offered possibilities for action, but those are different actions for different agents", 3) affordances are both "dependent on the capabilities of an environment or object as on the physical and psychological abilities of the user or individual, in their socio-cultural setting", 4) affordances are regarded as "co-evolutions between humans and the environment".

Stendal et al. (2016) argue the co-evolution view with affordances is an appropriate lens in Information Systems research for the study of the changing nature of technology-supported organisations as in the case of this study on social media use by development NGOs. Affordance theory provides Information Systems researchers a lens for developing a variety of mid-level social-technical theories (Volkoff and Strong 2017).

This initial literature review presents the context for which this study was conducted. As mentioned before this study provides empirical examples of attempts to introduce social media to serve developmental aims (Heeks 2008; Thompson 2008). The method of this study is presented hereafter.

RESEARCH METHOD

Given the nature of this research, a qualitative research was adopted (Glaser and Strauss 1967). A grounded theory method combined with a multiple case study was applied. In this study, the research approach used is the Glaserian grounded theory method (Glaser 1978b; Glaser 2002). It was used for both data analysis as well as theory building. The term "grounded" refers to the fact that this means not just abstract theorising, instead the theory needs to be grounded or rooted in observation (Trochim 2006; Urquhart 2001; Urquhart 2012).

Development NGOs from the Netherlands who are actively using social media were selected for this study. Fourteen development NGOs from the Netherlands were selected and interviews were conducted to collect data from the decision makers and practitioners in these organisations. Some of the characteristics of the analysed development NGOs and the roles of the interviewees are summarised in Table 1. Staff size is from 'Small' for less than 11, 'Mid-size' for 11 until 75, to

‘Large for more than 75 people. The ‘Focus area(s)’ summarises the main activities of the development NGO.

Development NGO pseudonym	# Interviewees	Interviewee role (*)	NGO age	Staff size	Focus area(s)
Crowdsourcing	2	a,b	1-5 years	Mid-size	Crowdfunding and wisdom of the crowd
Water & platform	1	a	6-15 years	Mid-size	Initially in water projects and now data management in development projects
Mobile phone focused	1	a	1-5 years	Mid-size	Mobile communication for development
Confederated	2	b,c	> 15 years	Large	Emergency relief, poverty and inequality, women’s rights, fair trade, climate change, refugees, microfinance and education,
Traumatised children	1	b	6-15 years	Large	Youth (post-war) trauma care
Advocacy	2	b,c	> 15 years	Large	Transparency, women’s rights, freedom of speech, sustainable development, sexual and reproductive rights
Community knowledge management	1	c	1-5 years	Small	Volunteering, knowledge management, community of practitioners
Child development	1	c	> 15 years	Large	Child rights and protection, emergency relief, education, sexual and reproductive rights
Health and sex education	1	b	1-5 years	Mid-size	Health education on promoting safe sexual choices
STD awareness	1	b	1-5 years	Mid-size	Promoting awareness on and combating sexually transmitted diseases
Crowdfunding	1	b,c	1-5 years	Small	Crowdfunding
E-learning	2	c,c	1-5 years	Small	Education
Agriculture	1	c	> 15 years	Large	Agriculture and its production value chain
Expertise sharing	1	b	> 15 years	Large	Expertise in agriculture, energy, water, sanitation and hygiene
(*) Interviewee role: a) Management, b) Marketing/Communications or c) Development practitioner					

Table 1. Overview of examined development NGOs.

The interviews were recorded after interviewees granted permission. All interviews were transcribed. The transcripts as well as supporting secondary data (organisation’s reports) were imported in a qualitative data analysis software programme (NVivo) for qualitative data analysis.

Following the conventions of grounded theory data coding and analysis proceeds from open coding (identifying categories, properties and dimensions) through selective coding (clustering around categories), to theoretical coding (Trochim 2006; Urquhart 2012), allowing theoretical categories and insights to emerge inductively from the data (Glaser 1978b). Theoretical coding considers the relationships between codes by generating hypotheses for integration into a theory (Fernández 2003; Glaser 1978a).

Urquhart and Vaast (2012) emphasise the role the Information Science discipline can have in theorising about social media. The combination of case study research and Grounded Theory works well for theory building and has been applied in Information Science before and is

appropriate given the limited extant knowledge and the exploratory nature of the study as claimed by Lehmann (2001) and Allan (2003).

Often with case study research, it is assumed that theory development is *prior* to data collection. This assumption is *in opposition* to the principle idea of the grounded theory methodology where *theory emerges from the data*. A way to resolve this issue is to use *an initial high-level conceptual framework as guiding instrument* for both the ‘non-committal’ literature research as well for the conceptualisation of the research problem while not distorting the emergence of theory from the data (Glaser 2002; Urquhart and Fernández 2013). This approach adopted for this study is shown in Figure 1.

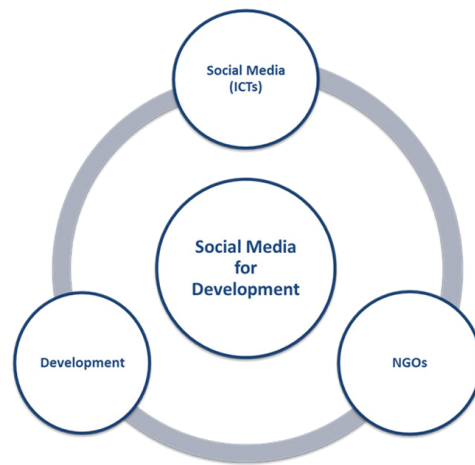


Figure 1. Initial high-level conceptual framework

The data analysis led to the identification of four broad categories under the theme perspectives attributed to organisational social media.

FINDINGS

Four categories emerged after analysing the open codes under the theme perspectives attributed to organisational social media. The perspectives attributed to organisational social media are classified in four clusters, namely Technological, Individual, Collective, and Contextual perspectives (Table 2).

The views with a Technological aspect relate to the fact that these views of the NGOs describe a technological feature of social media technologies that may shape social media use by the NGOs	Technological perspective
With Individual is understood the views on social media NGOs have, that are related to the personal sphere of social media use, i.e. how is it related to an individual?	Individual perspective
With Collective is meant the views the NGOs have that are related to social media use between a group of people or in a formalised structure, such as an (non-profit) organisation	Collective perspective
The Contextual aspects are related to those views of the NGOs that take into account the ‘context in which social media is used. E.g. the context of international development in this study.	Contextual perspective

Table 2. Four perspectives attributed to organisational media

These perspectives are discussed and illustrated in the following subsections.

Technological perspective

The views with a Technological perspective aspect are these views of the NGOs that relate to possibilities ascribed to a technological feature of social media technologies that may shape social media use by the NGOs. We see that the studied NGOs who are prolific users of social media make a clear distinction between values that they ascribe to social media technology in contrast with values they identify as created by the interplay of social media with the organisational entity of an NGO or other factors. A key observation is the *fading distinction between Internet, social media and mobile communication*. They are not separate silos. The following statement illustrates this:

“You see an integration of Internet and mobile. I think that the difference between them gradually will disappear. (...) Twitter is just like text messaging” (Community Knowledge Management NGO).

This technological, almost instrumental view on social media also suggests a stance that some technologies are merely *interchangeable or complementary* when it comes to use for certain (organisational) goals. The social-media-as-a-tool view is also expressed in this remark:

“I think social media is still a tool. You shouldn’t classify communication strategy according to tools” (Expertise sharing NGO)

The technological aspects of social media bring limitations that challenge the NGOs to carefully construct their communication to be suitable for the particular social media platform. This *communicating with few words* is illustrated here:

“Social media isn’t appropriate for very voluminous contents. You don’t upload massive reports. You can’t go in-depth...But, especially, suitable if you are good with limited resources and few words to convey what you stand for.” (Traumatised Children NGO)

Individual perspective

With Individual perspective is understood the views on social media NGOs have, that are related to the personal sphere of social media use, i.e. how is it related to an individual? The respondents expressed their views on how social media is related to an *individual’s online (self-)expression*. Social media provides the virtue of approachability according to some of the respondents. The individual person behind the social media account (on the side of the NGO) is regarded important by the online audience:

“With social media the actual person behind [ed. the online account] is more important. For example, LinkedIn: you don’t have an account as an organisation. You need to be a person. You may create a group/organisation page. Nevertheless, you have to identify yourself as a human being. It is about individuals.” (Expertise Sharing NGO)

Furthermore, the interaction with the individual person on the recipients’ end is considered important as well. This NGO is using, next to a moderated FAQ on their website for broad communication, additional tools such as text messaging to inform young people via one-to-one communication on issues they struggle with and that are considered private or taboo.

“Since we use SMS with young people [Ed. for sexual education project], they can SMS us with personal things. They ask everything!” (E-learning NGO)

Collective perspective

With Collective perspective is meant the views the NGOs have that are related to social media use between a group of people or in a formalised structure, such as an (non-profit) organisation,

an NGO. NGOs are aware that there is a shift *from one-way communication to engaging and dialogue*:

“The old way is really I have a message I transmit, and now it is more a conversation in which you have to engage” (Crowdsourcing NGO)

Community building activities are illustrated by the following. In the following quotations the NGOs argue social media provide them a combination of being more approachable to their audience, showing a personal side of the staff, understanding whom they are communicating with, and using a more personal communication style.

“We try to be very approachable, meaning that it is fun and easy for everyone to support us, but also providing a piece of added value. The [ed. Name of NGO] brings something you don't find with others [ed. other NGOs]. Our target audience is in my head, who has become a person. She has a name and age, location etc. We have her personalized and everything we communicate, we communicate to her.” (Crowdsourcing NGO)

Many of the NGOs argue the intention of their produced content is *stimulating sharing*. They view this as an integral aspect of social media.

“When you buy [ed. social media ads] you see actually that the return on engagement is much higher. So it turns out positively, the moment you create content that people find interesting and want to share with their constituencies.” (STD Awareness NGO)

Social media also stimulates NGOs to bring the aid workers in the field to the foreground in their communication as this NGO stated.

“Listen, the head of communication is not the one who actually should start blogging or tweeting. No one is interested in the adventures of the head of communications [ed. name of the NGO]. What you want to hear is the adventures of the people in the field. Those people have to go tweeting. Interesting is the content of what we do, written by our experts in the field.” (Expertise sharing NGO)

Contextual perspective

The Contextual perspective is related to those views of the NGOs that take into account the ‘context’, the environment, with its social, political, cultural and geographical aspects, in which

social media is being used by the organisation. The context within this research, the operations area of the studied NGOs, is that of international development.

The following respondent argues that the idea to have relevant content pushed them to look for *content produced in the global South*.

“The focus shifted from access in the South [ed. digital divide] to content from the South, and now shift to alliances with other content providers like local bloggers who provide relevant content. Latest focus is in training social media and ICT use.” (Advocacy NGO)

Another contextual aspect is politics related. The local political environment may be restrictive for certain online communication. This NGO ran a peace project but remained discretely at the background in order not to endanger their local partners.

“Local partners are running the site and consult local NGOs of how to use IT on how to bypass governmental control. With [Ed. example of peace project in Cambodia] we are not activists who are balancing on the ‘risk line’. Our NGO is just operating discretely.” (E-learning NGO)

Some NGOs are aware of the sometimes apparent techno-optimistic view on technologies to tackle developmental issues. One of the respondents argued that social media is *no panacea* for solving developmental issues:

“New media is not the solution to everything.” (E-learning NGO)

From the individual value clusters, we move now to the relationships between values of different value clusters.

Relationships between the four perspectives

The data reveals multiple instances where a relationship between different perspectives occurred. The following subsections illustrate the combinations of (two) that were found between the four perspectives.

Technological & Individual perspective

Some NGOs argue social media may shape communication behaviour. The individual professionals of the NGO will use more *colloquial speech*.

“It is almost intrinsic to the technology that it [ed. the conversation] becomes more informal.” (Child development NGO)

A combination where the Technological aspect of the particular social media are influencing values that contribute to the Individual attributes is illustrated in this quotation.

“(…) social media is huge, but in some cases, for particular themes it is less suitable. Privacy sensitivity of the topics we deal with, particularly on HIV/Aids you really have to be careful with.” (STD awareness NGO)

Some NGOs view social media as a medium for constant presence and visibility, requiring an active attitude from the organisation.

“We must show that we are present (...) So we must be visible all the time. Like, hey guys, here we are, this is what we have to offer you!” (Health and Sex Education NGO)

Technological & Collective perspective

The technological view on social media is associated with ongoing novelty and therefore bringing situation in which the NGO can *experiment* with new features or platforms to be beneficial to the organisation.

“We are experimenting with a list of staff members in a list on Twitter. We wants to do this with the partners too. Like a who’s who of staff of the organisation.” (Advocacy NGO)

However, the possibilities of social media have to be taken serious in order to fully grasp its potential, this NGO argues. Another respondent combines the nature of social media with the type of engagement and dialogue the NGOs has with groups on these platforms.

“Twitter is very volatile. We don’t engage much in discussions on Twitter. If someone wants to conversate longer or deeper, we refer to our online discussion platform [ed. name of the platform]. It is not because we want to avoid [ed. discussion] but there we can go deeper. Sometimes people do join and sometimes they don’t. But then you know those are not the people who really want to start a discussion with you.” (Confederated NGO)

The change of dynamics and potential of opening up communication is viewed as to be of value for development NGOs.

“My view on social media [ed. for development projects]? The first thing that comes to mind is dynamics and change. (...) The real interesting thing of social media is that it completely opens up communication [ed. of our organisation].” (Traumatised Children NGO)

There are several NGOs who view social media as a kind of laboratory environment, in which they can experiment in one development project and apply lessons learned in other projects in other countries.

“Yes, she has a bit of a role model. She has a bit of the pioneering role, a little bit of pioneering, and trying [ed. experimenting with social media]. The main part of the task is setting up the capacity in Laos to join [ed. name of NGO’s internal online collaboration project] to take part in, to develop. But while she does this, she actually helps building a model for neighbouring countries.” (Child development NGO).

Technological & Contextual perspective

Regarding technological development, the connectivity is improving in many regions and use of mobile phone and access to internet are increasingly having impact on the activities of this NGO:

“There are even villages with a private Twitter account and more followers than [ed. Name of NGO] itself. One of those communities, for example, is a hospital in a slum in Nairobi, who has an own Twitter account, which keeps their followers up-to-date on what is happening in the hospital, what projects they are working on. Internet tricky? They are in Nairobi, so good connection.”

This respondent highlights the similarities in the views on social media networking and international development activities.

“What we call international cooperation 1.0 is like the old transmission model. That is television and radio, via which you broadcast and everyone hears the same.... There is no real interaction. The 2.0 model actually deploys social media, so everyone can transmit and receive at the same time. (...). Therefore, it is a kind of network. That is now happening within international cooperation.” (Crowdsourcing NGO)

A combination where the Technological aspect of the particular social media are enhancing values that contribute to the Collective and Contextual attributes is in this quotation. NGOs do understand the intricacies of using technologies in the context of development dealing with local cultural norms and beliefs. So, their views are sometimes shaped by experiences, such as this where text message number 666 is associated with the devil by some Christians in a certain country, and this forced the NGO to choose a different number, thereby learning that for future projects the *local norms and beliefs have to be taken into account*.

“Regarding failures... The [text message] code 666 does not work in a Christian country like Uganda.” (Mobile Phone NGO)

Some NGOs are aware of the sometimes apparent techno-optimistic view on technologies to tackle developmental issues. One of the respondents argued that social media is no panacea:

“New media is not the solution to everything.” (E-learning NGO)

Individual & Contextual perspective

Several NGOs view the *tone of voice* in social media important and consider it necessary to differentiate and adjust to the customs and language use of different audiences or user segments to be more appealing to them.

“We communicate differently to East-Africans than to Dutch people” (Crowdsourcing NGO)

The ‘E-Learning’ NGO identifies different target audiences on different platforms (in different countries) and provided an example in Kenya where to appeal to a younger audience they used English Swahili slang in their online communication.

Individual & Collective perspective

The combination of Individual and Collective values is present in this *mix of private and work-related communication*, which was expressed by many NGOs:

“Nowadays more people are tweeting a lot. Also our staff is talking about [ed. Name of NGO] in their private tweets.” (Traumatised Children NGO)

The potential of own staff to further disseminate social media content from the NGO, by mixing work and private communications is also viewed as a positive effect by this respondent:

“Here we have a lot of people who are active on social media. Despite that private and work are separated, people should know what to do privately, but they all have their own constituencies. And if those people spread the content, they all can become supporters, which is huge.” (STD Awareness NGO)

Social media in the view of some NGOs is particularly seen as having a value for *connecting people* and from there *creating community and collaboration*:

“We have a strategy to attract our audience via ‘Trust me’, via ‘Tell me’ and ‘Show me’ to ‘Involve me’.” (Crowdsourcing NGO)

Tasking some activities to people on the ground is viewed as beneficial for the authenticity and sincerity of the online communication some NGOs argue.

“Although we have an online platform, don’t ignore offline. You can delegate some tasks. For example, blogging by aid workers and beneficiaries in the field. Those stories are authentic and much appreciated.” (Crowdfunding NGO)

Collective & Contextual perspective

Another interesting observation was that NGOs acknowledge the *local knowledge* available to tackle developmental issues but it needs communication mean to disseminate.

“People who live in developing countries often have the best ideas on how they can solve problems, and, in fact, they must be able to present that simply online.” (Mobile Phone NGO)

Re-purposing material on social media is another activity of NGOs. Content produced for a particular development projects can be *re-appropriated* for other development projects. This NGO illustrates how content produced has been used for public online communication, re-purposed for other development projects, and been used for internal knowledge management and training practices.

“One of the aid workers is based in Laos. He is there to set up the local branch. A video is being produced. It’s being re-edited for other local content use in one of the languages

in Laos. Afterwards it goes to what I call the cross-organisational workspace where staff from multiple country offices of the NGO collaborate and assess the re-purposing of the online material.” (Child development NGO)

A combination where Collective and Contextual values are simultaneously present. The following quotation is an illustration of this, where fear of surveillance and oppression of local organisations influences what is put online.

“We sometimes collaborate with organisations that are not able to put everything online. There are human rights organisations in a country where they are oppressed when they publish certain things online and for which people can be arrested. You don’t want that happen...” (Confederated NGO)

One picture to combine the perspectives attributed to organisational social media

In the preceding sections, we have discussed the findings for the four identified perspectives. The following diagram captures the possible inter-cluster relationships between the four perspectives attributed to organisational social media use.

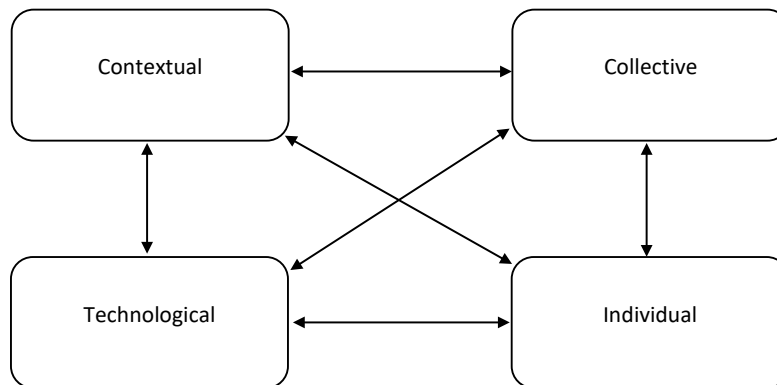


Figure 1. Schematic diagram of inter-cluster relationships between the four perspectives for organisational social media use by development NGOs.

The four perspectives are useful to identify the values of organisational social media according to development NGOs, in a way that facilitates unpacking into the four perspectives to which those values may be associated.

DISCUSSION

There is an ongoing discussion on the implications of social media use in society, and particularly the use of ICT for development. This study considers those implications in the context of interventions using social media by international development NGOs. Theory building in the social media domain is required, and this study aims to build an initial theory of how NGOs might approach the use of social media in a development context. There is still a gap in this area as few papers have yet built social media theory from case studies, cf. Urquhart and Vaast (2012), particularly in the context of development, cf. Thompson (2008). This research is a modest attempt in that field.

Our findings suggest there are four distinct perspectives attributed to the use of organisational social media by development NGOs. Reflecting on these findings in light of the literature, we suggest comparing these with the concepts of sociomateriality and affordances.

Rather than focusing on the individual affordances, our approach is identifying compelling areas of values attributed to organisational media, thereby considering *affordance clustering* in four distinct areas (technological, individual, collective e.g. group/organisational, and contextual), which sometimes have a pattern of interconnectedness. In this way, theorising about affordances creates a kind of middle-range theorising on the intricacies of sociomateriality. Scholars who have studied affordance clusters or sometimes referred to as *affordance ecologies* have for example highlighted the dimensions of affordance ecologies. Lindberg and Lyytinen (2013) introduced the concept of *affordance ecologies*, in which the association with ecology invokes thinking about this complexity and dynamics, which comprises of three domains: infrastructure, organisation and practice. There are comparisons with our approach, although they identified three dimensions. Lindberg et al. (2014) presented the following four dimensions of these ecologies when examining configurations of affordances in software development: clustering, spread, concentration, and alignment. These scholars argued that affordances need to be considered not only individually, but also as configurations of multiple affordances and more research is required to understand these clusters (Lindberg et al. 2014).

Looking to the four identified perspectives attributed to social media, we compare their formulation with the literature on clusters of affordances, affordance ecologies, and configurations of affordances. Interestingly the four perspectives also constitute of what is called

the landscape of affordances, “the total ensemble of available affordances for a population in a given environment” (Ramstead et al. 2016).

The Technological perspective encompasses affordances related to the functional affordances of social media. Functional affordances are potential uses rooted in material properties of information systems that identify what users may be able to use the system for, given the user’s capabilities and goals (Markus and Silver 2008). Stendal et al. (2016) conducted a literature review on the concept of affordances in Information Systems and concluded that the most reported affordances in the reviewed literature are functional affordances. The Technological values also closely relate to the concept of technological affordances, which “establishes material qualities of technologies and media as being constituted at least partly outside the communicative, mediate, and affective processes of the people who use them” (Nagy and Neff 2015). Treem and Leonardi (2012) defined four affordances on social media in organisations: visibility, persistence, editability, and association, that can be regarded as belonging to this same affordance cluster. The Technological perspective values are related to the list of social media affordances described by Wagner et al. (2014). They argue “social media afford various new behaviours that were not previously possible with prior forms of computer-mediated communication., e.g. authoring, reviewability, editability, recombability, association, and experimentation”, while linking them to knowledge creation within organisations (Wagner et al. 2014).

The Individual perspective is closely related to the concept of an individualised affordance that “is actualized by one actor acting independently of others” (Volkoff and Strong 2017) or “that someone enacts when using a technology’s features, but that affordance is not common to his or her workgroup or department” (Leonardi 2013b) or social affordances for networked individualism, that depict “how the Internet can influence everyday life” (Wellman et al. 2003).

The Collective perspective resembles the collective affordances, defined as “affordances that is collectively created by members of a group, in the aggregate, which allows the group to do something that it could not otherwise accomplish, and shared affordances, where these are “shared by all members of a group” (Leonardi 2013b). Furthermore, the Collective values are closely related to the concept of structural affordances “for amplifying, recording, and spreading

information and social acts where these affordances can shape publics and how people negotiate them” (boyd 2010).

Vaast et al. (2017) present collective-level affordances called collective, shared and connective affordances that vary in their interdependence typology, which in our study match with the Collective perspective. This Collective perspective also encompasses Leonardi’s shared and collective affordances, where a “shared affordance is the same affordance being actualized by many people in similar ways; while a collective affordance involves many people doing different things to accomplish a joint goal” (Leonardi 2013b). Raja-Yusof et al. (2016) conclude in their study on cyber-volunteering that collective and individualized affordances are among the most relevant affordances to NGOs, which relates to the Collective and Individual perspectives we identified.

Contextual perspective is closely related to cultural affordances. Cultural affordances are defined as “the kind of affordances that humans encounter in the niches that they constitute. There are two kinds of cultural affordances: natural and conventional affordances.” (Ramstead et al. 2016).

The interrelationship between these four aforementioned perspectives, specifically in the realm of individual versus technological, and collective versus technological perspectives is closely related and to some extent broadens (by examining the contextual perspective) the concept of ‘connective affordances’, that “extend research on affordances as a relational concept by considering not only the relationships between technology and users but also the interdependence type among users and the effects of this interdependence onto what users can do with the technology” (Vaast et al. 2017). Zheng and Yu (2016) identify the (one-directional) relationship between functional affordances (incorporated in our Technological perspective) via a collective action process into what they call affordances for practice (incorporated in our Collective perspective). We have extended the described one-directional view to bi-directional relationships.

Summary of key findings four emerging perspectives in relation to literature

In the literature various configurations, groups, or clusters of affordances are described. However, less is known about the relationships between these affordance clusters or affordance ecologies. Literature on this subject is limited in Information Systems. We theorise that for a fundamental understanding of affordances in the domain of Information Systems the

interconnectedness may play a role for the existence of combinations of affordances with a cross-cluster relationship. The following table summarises the key findings regarding the identified value clusters in relation to the discussed literature. This demonstrates empirically the concepts of affordance clusters and the connections between them.

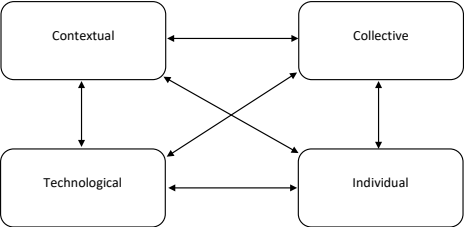
Key findings discussion	Relation to literature
Technological perspective ascribes to potentials created by technological features of social media technologies that may shape social media use by the organisation.	Closely related with functional affordances (Markus and Silver 2008) and technological affordances (Nagy and Neff 2015). Related to the list of social media affordances described by Treem and Leonardi (2012), and Wagner et al. (2014).
Individual perspective, that is related to the personal sphere of social media use, i.e. how is it related to an individual?	Related to an individualised affordance (Leonardi 2013b), and the social affordances for networked individualism (Wellman et al. 2003).
Collective perspective is related to social media use between a group of people or in a formalised structure, such as an organisation.	Extends the views on social media affordances in the context of knowledge creation within organisations with an overarching concept (Wagner et al. 2014). Closely related to the combination of collective and shared affordances (Leonardi 2013b). Closely related to concepts of structural affordances (boyd 2010). Collective-level affordances called collective, shared and connective affordances that vary in their interdependence typology (Vaast et al. 2017).
Contextual perspective is related to those views of the NGOs that take into account the ‘context’, the environment, with its social, political, cultural and geographical aspects, in which social media is being used by the organisation.	Somewhat related to cultural affordances (Ramstead et al. 2016) and even extends those affordances with for example political and geographical aspects.
<p>Next to the Technological, Individual, Collective and Contextual perspectives attributed to organisational social media use, we theorise that multiple relations between these four affordance clusters are possible.</p> 	<p>Closely related to the concept of affordances landscape (Ramstead et al. 2016), and configurations of affordances (Lindberg et al. 2014), and affordance ecologies (Lindberg and Lyytinen 2013). The connective affordances are related to the interrelationship between Technological and Individual, or Technological and Collective perspectives (Vaast et al. 2017).</p> <p><i>Extends these concepts with the possible interrelationship between affordance clusters or affordance ecologies and the possible bi-directional aspect of those relationships.</i></p>

Table 3. Summary of key findings value clusters in relation to literature on affordances clusters.

CONCLUSION

The ideas presented in this paper are outlining a picture where one looks beyond the single affordances to clusters of affordances and the connection between those clusters. The theory of affordances is gaining attention within Information Systems. Volkoff and Strong (2017) argue

that the theory of affordances is very useful as a lens for how we look at a variety of topics in Information Systems (IS) domain, like IS adoption, adaptation, and organisational change. Stendal et al. (2016) corroborate this view, but also contend that it requires critical construction to mature the concept. Orlikowski and Scott (2008) identify two main research streams on technology and organisations, which they describe, according to their ontological view of technology in organisations, as focused on either discrete entities or mutually dependent ensembles. The difference between them they argue is that first is about humans, organisations and technology considered to be independent entities with inherent characteristics, whereas the latter assumed those “to be interdependent systems that shape each other through ongoing interaction” (Orlikowski and Scott 2008). This study fits in that second research stream.

By developing an affordance lens to explore organisational social media use, our paper offers several contributions. The affordances landscape we constructed consists of four affordance value clusters, called Technological, Individual, Collective and Contextual perspectives. We argue that our suggested extended look on affordance clusters or so-called affordance ecologies and especially the identified relationships between those clusters provide a richer and deeper understanding of the interplay of information systems and the organisational domain and the environment, thereby providing a useful lens to understand the sociotechnical mechanism in Information Systems context. The relationships between affordances clusters occur from the observation that one affordance in a particular affordances cluster is related in the same instance to another affordance in another affordances cluster. Orlikowski and Scott (2008) press for theorising the fusion of technology and work in organisations into an additional research stream that they refer to under the umbrella term sociomateriality. The fusion aspect is to some extent reached by the study of the interactions and inter-relationships of the affordance clusters in this paper. Affordances can be an important element in developing a sociomaterial explanation of the human, organisation (including its context), and technology nexus and theorising social media use by organisations such as development NGOs (Faraj and Azad 2012; Leonardi and Vaast 2016).

Although the setting of this study was international development and the organisations were non-profit, we assume the ideas can be put forward into the context of for-profit firms and other environments. Further research should also examine the development NGOs that are not prolific users of or the early adopters of social media.

REFERENCES

- Aitamurto, T. 2011. "The New Role of Nonprofit Organizations: From Middleman to a Platform Organization," in: *National Civic Review*. Wiley Periodicals, Inc., pp. 40-41.
- Allan, G. 2003. "The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods (EJBRM),".
- Atack, I. 1999. "Four Criteria of Development NGO Legitimacy," *World Development* (27:5), pp. 855-864.
- Avgerou, C. 2010. "Discourses on ICT and Development," *Information technologies and international development* (6:3), pp. 1-18.
- Bach, J., and Stark, D. 2004. "Link, Search, Interact: The Co-Evolution of NGOs and Interactive Technology," *Theory, Culture & Society* (21:3), pp. 101-117.
- Ballantyne, P., and Addison, C. 2000. "Cooperation on the Web: trends and practice in the development sector.," *Information Development* (16:1), pp. 15-23.
- Berente, N., Hansen, S., Pike, J. C., and Bateman, P. J. 2011. "Arguing the value of virtual worlds: patterns of discursive sensemaking of an innovative technology," *MIS Quarterly* (35:3), pp. 685-710.
- boyd, d. 2010. "Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications," in *A networked self*. Routledge, pp. 47-66.
- Burgess, J., Marwick, A., and Poell, T. 2017. *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*. SAGE.
- Cheung, C. M. K., Chiu, P.-Y., and Lee, M. K. O. 2011. "Online social networks: Why do students use facebook?," *Computers in Human Behavior* (27:4), pp. 1337-1343.
- Clarke, G. 1998. "Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Politics in the Developing World," *Political Studies* (46:1), pp. 36-52.
- Faraj, S., and Azad, B. 2012. "The materiality of technology: An affordance perspective," *Materiality and organizing: Social interaction in a technological world*, pp. 237-258.
- Ferguson, J., Soekijad, M., Huysman, M., and Vaast, E. 2013. "Blogging for ICT4D: reflecting and engaging with peers to build development discourse," *Information Systems Journal*, pp. no-no.
- Fernández, W. D. 2003. "Metateams in Major Information Technology Projects: A Grounded Theory on Conflict, Trust, Communication, and Cost," in: *School of Information Systems*. Queensland University of Technology.
- Fuchs, C. 2013. *Social Media, A Critical Introduction*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Fuchs, C. 2017. *Social media: A critical introduction*. Sage.
- Gibson, J. J. 1977. "The Theory of Affordances," in *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology*, R. Shaw and J. Bransford (eds.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc., pp. 127-143.
- Glaser, B. G. 1978a. *Theoretical sensitivity: advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. 1978b. *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of Grounded Theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. 2002. "Conceptualization: On Theory and Theorizing Using Grounded Theory," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (1:2).
- Glaser, B. G., and Strauss, A. L. 1967. *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. Hawthorne, NY: AldineTransaction.
- Heeks, R. 2008. "ICT4D 2.0: The Next Phase of Applying ICT for International Development," in: *Computer*. IEEE Computer Society, pp. 26-33.
- Heeks, R. 2017. *Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D)*. Taylor & Francis.
- Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., and Norenzayan, A. 2010. "Most people are not WEIRD," *Nature* (466:7302), p. 29.
- Kanter, B., and Fine, A. 2010. *The Networked Nonprofit Connecting with Social Media to Drive Change*. Jossey-Bass.

- Kaplan, A. M., and Haenlein, M. 2010. "Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media," *Business Horizons* (53:1), pp. 59-68.
- Lehmann, H. P. 2001. "A Grounded Theory of International Information Systems." Auckland, New Zealand.: University of Auckland.
- Leonardi, P., and Vaast, E. 2016. "Social Media and Their Affordances for Organizing: A Review and Agenda for Research," *Academy of Management Annals*.
- Leonardi, P. M. 2011. "When flexible routines meet flexible technologies: Affordance, constraint, and the imbrication of human and material agencies," *MIS quarterly*, pp. 147-167.
- Leonardi, P. M. 2013a. "Theoretical foundations for the study of sociomateriality," *Information and organization* (23:2), pp. 59-76.
- Leonardi, P. M. 2013b. "When does technology use enable network change in organizations? A comparative study of feature use and shared affordances," *MIS Quarterly* (37:3), pp. 749-775.
- Lewis, D. 2010. "Nongovernmental Organizations, Definition and History," in *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, H. Anheier and S. Toepler (eds.). Springer US, pp. 1056-1062.
- Lindberg, A., Gaskin, J., Berente, N., and Lyytinen, K. 2014. "Exploring Configurations of Affordances: The Case of Software Development,").
- Lindberg, A., and Lyytinen, K. 2013. "Towards a theory of affordance ecologies," in *Materiality and Space*. Springer, pp. 41-61.
- Makuwira, J. J. 2013. *Non-Governmental Development Organizations and the Poverty Reduction Agenda: The moral crusaders*. Taylor & Francis.
- Markus, M. L., and Silver, M. S. 2008. "A foundation for the study of IT effects: A new look at DeSanctis and Poole's concepts of structural features and spirit," *Journal of the Association for Information systems* (9:10/11), p. 609.
- Masetti-Zannini, A. 2007. "Web 2.0 and International Development NGOs," *Knowledge Politics Quarterly (KPQ)* (1:1).
- Mayfield, A. 2008. "What is Social Media?," in: *iCrossing*.
- Mefalopulos, P. 2008. "Development Communication Sourcebook: Broadening the Boundaries of Communication." Washington DC 20433: The World Bank.
- Nagy, P., and Neff, G. 2015. "Imagined Affordance: Reconstructing a Keyword for Communication Theory," *Social Media + Society* (1:2), p. 2056305115603385.
- OECD. 2006. "Digital Divide." *Glossary of statistical terms* Retrieved 27 June 2009, from <http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=4719>
- Ørecomm. 2012. *Social Media in Development Cooperation*. Malmö University and Roskilde University: Ørecomm - Centre for Communication and Glocal Change.
- Orlikowski, W. J., and Scott, S. V. 2008. "Sociomateriality: Challenging the Separation of Technology, Work and Organization," *The Academy of Management Annals* (2:1), pp. 433-474.
- Prakash, A., and De, R. 2007. "Importance of development context in ICT4D projects: A study of computerization of land records in India," *Information Technology & People* (20:3), pp. 226-281.
- Raja-Yusof, R.-J., Norman, A.-A., Abdul-Rahman, S.-S., Nazri, N. a., and Mohd-Yusoff, Z. 2016. "Cyber-volunteering: Social media affordances in fulfilling NGO social missions," *Computers in Human Behavior* (57), pp. 388-397.
- Ramstead, M. J. D., Veissière, S. P. L., and Kirmayer, L. J. 2016. "Cultural Affordances: Scaffolding Local Worlds Through Shared Intentionality and Regimes of Attention," *Frontiers in Psychology* (7:1090).
- Reddi, U. R. V. 2011. "Primer 1: An Introduction to ICT for Development," UN-APCICT/ESCAP.
- Roztock, N., and Weistroffer, H. R. 2011. "Information technology success factors and models in developing and emerging economies," *Information Technology for Development* (17:3), pp. 163-167.
- Schlagwein, D., and Hu, M. 2017. "How and why organisations use social media: five use types and their relation to absorptive capacity," *Journal of Information Technology* (32:2), pp. 194-209.

- Servaes, J. 2008. *Communication for Development and Social Change*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd.
- Stendal, K., Thapa, D., and Lanamäki, A. 2016. "Analyzing the concept of affordances in information systems," *System Sciences (HICSS), 2016 49th Hawaii International Conference on: IEEE*, pp. 5270-5277.
- Thompson, M. 2008. "ICT and development studies: Towards development 2.0," *Journal of International Development* (20:6), pp. 821-835.
- Treem, J. W., and Leonardi, P. M. 2012. "Social Media Use in Organizations: Exploring the Affordances of Visibility, Editability, Persistence, and Association.," in *Communication Yearbook*. pp. 143-189.
- Trochim, W. M. K. 2006. "Qualitative Methods." *Research Methods Knowledge Base*, from <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/qualmeth.php>
- UNDP-APDIP. 2004. *Information and Communications Technology for Development - A Sourcebook for Parliamentarians*. United Nations Development Programme - Asia Pacific Development Information Programme (UNDP-APDIP).
- UNDP. 2001. "Creating a Development Dynamic," United Nations Development Programme.
- Unwin, T. 2014. "Can ICTs really make a difference to the lives of poor people and marginalised communities?," in: *Symposium "Perspectives on ICT4D"*. Amsterdam: The Network Institute, VU University Amsterdam.
- Urquhart, C. (ed.) 2001. *An Encounter with Grounded Theory: Tackling the Practical and Philosophical Issues*. Idea Group Publishing.
- Urquhart, C. 2012. *Grounded Theory for Qualitative Analysis: A Practical Guide*. Sage.
- Urquhart, C., and Fernández, W. 2013. "Using grounded theory method in information systems: the researcher as blank slate and other myths," *Journal of Information Technology* (28:3), pp. 224-236.
- Urquhart, C., and Vaast, E. 2012. "Building Theory From Case Studies In The Web 2.0 Era: A New Frontier For IS Research," *Thirty Third International Conference on Information Systems*, Orlando.
- Vaast, E., Safadi, H., Lapointe, L., and Negoita, B. 2017. "Social Media Affordances For Connective Action: An Examination Of Microblogging Use During The Gulf Of Mexico Oil Spill," *MIS Quarterly* (41:4).
- Volkoff, O., and Strong, D., M. . 2017. "Affordance theory and how to use it in IS research," in *The Routledge Companion to Management Information Systems*. Routledge.
- Wagner, D., Vollmar, G., and Wagner, H.-T. 2014. "The impact of information technology on knowledge creation: An affordance approach to social media," *Journal of Enterprise Information Management* (27:1), pp. 31-44.
- Waters, R. D. 2009. "The Use of Social Media by Nonprofit Organizations: An Examination from the Diffusion of Innovations Perspective," in *Handbook of research on social interaction technologies and collaboration software: Concepts and trends*, T. Dumova and R. Fiordo (eds.). IGI Global.
- Wellman, B., Quan-Haase, A., Boase, J., Chen, W., Hampton, K., Díaz, I., and Miyata, K. 2003. "The Social Affordances of the Internet for Networked Individualism," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (8:3), pp. 0-0.
- WorldBank. 2014. "Glossary of key terms - Non-government organization (NGO)." Retrieved 21 April, 2014, from <http://go.worldbank.org/HSXB13LCA0>
- Zheng, Y., and Yu, A. 2016. "Affordances of social media in collective action: the case of Free Lunch for Children in China," *Info. Sys. Jour.* (26:3), pp. 289-313.
- Zuniga, L., and White, N. 2009. "Module Web 2.0 and Social Media for Development," in: *Information Management Resource Kit (IMARK)*. FAO.