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# The Use of Social Networking in Community Development

The use of social media and social networking has become a significant force in political organizing, social interaction, and economic development. A growing body of literature now describes the use of social media as a tool in areas such as political action, democracy promotion, business marketing, and public relations management (Brown, 2009; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Hais & Morley, 2009; Qualman, 2009; Davis, 2005).

The use of social media specifically in the field of community and economic development has also recently begun to receive scholarly attention (see for example, Fernback, 2005; Laudeman, 2005; Pigg & Crank, 2005; Stillman, 2005; Stern & Dillman, 2006; Huber, 1987).

There is strong evidence to suggest that social networks can improve the socio-economic well-being of communities. For example, Eagle, Macy, & Claxton (2010) found the structure of social networks and related diversity of individuals' relationships is strongly correlated with the economic development of communities. However, with the dramatic changes currently taking place regarding information technology, there is need to continually reexamine and analyze the use of social media and social networking in the field of community development.

To bridge the gap in information about various contemporary tools related to social media and social networking, I have three objectives in this article:

1. Provide a definition and background of various social media and networking options,
2. Discuss the relationship of social media and networking to the Community Development Society's Principles of Good Practice, and,
3. Present a discussion of current challenges, opportunities, and potential future directions related to the use of social media and networking in community development.

To accomplish these objectives, I review pertinent literature and inventory current social media and networking options and provide an analysis relevant to the field of community development. The analysis is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of all social media and networking options, but rather I seek to invoke reflection and initiate

future deliberation about the use of select technologies that I see as having the potential to transform the methods of dialoging, decision-making, information sharing, and relationship building in the community development profession in the twenty-first century.

## Social Media and Community Development

Social media involves the use of various technological tools and methods for sharing and discussing information. Social media is a way to transmit or distribute information to a broad audience where users have an opportunity to create and distribute content. By comparison, social networking is the use of these tools specifically to connect and interact with others. Social networking is the act of engagement where groups of people with common interests are associated and build relationships through a shared community of interest (Stelzner, 2009; Hartshorn, 2010).

For example, the on-line website YouTube, the video-sharing portal where users can upload, share, and view videos, is considered a social media site. In comparison, Facebook was created on the premise of linking individuals and organizations into various networks of common interests or associations. In community development, one can use social media to facilitate social networking and conversely, one can network, form partnerships, and build relationships by leveraging social media.

### *The Emergence of Web 2.0*

There has been a dramatic transformation in the way information is created, disseminated and distributed using various social media in recent years. One significant transformation is the establishment of Web 2.0, a term referring to myriad web applications that provide for interactive information sharing and collaboration via the internet using a variety of means such as text, images, audio, and video (Addison, 2006).

In contrast to passive viewing of web content, a Web 2.0 site allows users to create content, interact, and collaborate in a user-generated virtual-type community. Users actively participate and network with a potential to pool the collective intelligence of the users and create opportunities for free and unrestricted input for better decisions. In this sense, the whole is greater than the sum of its virtual and often widely disseminated parts.

The emergence of Web 2.0 has transformed not only the quality and content of social media, it has allowed for greater connectivity and interaction for social networking. The quality and quantity of social media and social networking sites are becoming countless, but below is an attempt to outline and describe some examples of these tools for communication.

The first area to explore is the use of blogs and blogging. The term is a combination of the words “web” and “log” and involve the posting of commentary or news on a particular subject. Users can either view the content passively or if allowed, can react to posts and contribute content.

Examples include the sites Blogger ([blogger.com](http://blogger.com)), Wordpress ([wordpress.org](http://wordpress.org)), and Twitter ([twitter.com](http://twitter.com)). The emergence of the Twitter service enables users to send and read other users' messages of text-based posts made up of up to 140 characters called tweets. Users may subscribe or “follow” other author's tweets. This service is increasingly available and integrated in Smartphone technology. Twitter has gained popularity rapidly and currently has more than 100 million users worldwide (Economic Times, 2010).

The use of wikis has become a popular option for individuals who would like to provide content on web pages that other users can edit. These sites are an excellent option for individuals who wish to coordinate information, collaborate and share ideas on various social media content, and track changes from many individuals. Examples of wiki applications include Wikispaces ([wikispaces.com](http://wikispaces.com)) and Google Docs ([docs.google.com](http://docs.google.com)). Wikipedia ([wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org)), described as “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit,” is perhaps the most ubiquitous example of a peer-reviewed site where users can establish or edit existing content on almost any subject imaginable.

An electronic mailing list allows users to email information to other users or “subscribers” on a list. Sometimes referred to as list serves (after the first electronic mailing list software application called LISTSERV), recipients, with permission, can respond to the entire group of subscribers. There are many list management tools, including Listserv ([lsoft.com](http://lsoft.com)), Majordomo ([greatcircle.com/majordomo](http://greatcircle.com/majordomo)), and Dada Mail ([dadamailproject.com](http://dadamailproject.com)).

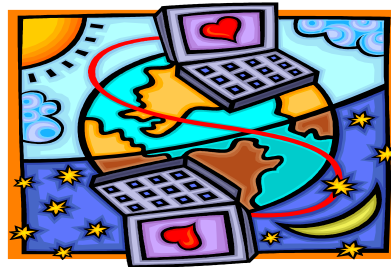
Social networking sites allow users to share ideas and user-generated content (including images and video) while building connections and associations, both personal and professional. There are three fundamental uses for social networking: (1) As a means of personal communication, (2) To link groups, and (3) To promote an idea.

There are myriad examples but some of the more popular social networking sites include Facebook ([facebook.com](http://facebook.com)), Myspace ([myspace.com](http://myspace.com)), Ning ([ning.com](http://ning.com)), and LinkedIn ([linkedin.com](http://linkedin.com)). Facebook dominates this market with reports of more than 500 million active users as of July 2010.

Another important tool for community development professionals is the use of open-source software in which the source code for the application is developed in a public and often highly collaborative manner. While the editing of private, commercial software is reserved for copyright holders and protected by a software license, open source software permits and encourages users to study,

change, and improve the software. This allows for free software that is continually being updated and revised. Open source programs exist for nearly every conceivable application and are being developed rapidly.

There are many other significant tools and applications available to community developers including video conferencing applications such as Skype ([skype.com](http://skype.com)), video and image sharing sites including YouTube ([youtube.com](http://youtube.com)) and Flickr ([flickr.com](http://flickr.com)), virtual world applications including Second Life ([secondlife.com](http://secondlife.com)) and on-line mapping resources such as Google Earth ([earth.google.com](http://earth.google.com)) and Google Maps ([maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com)). Each of these applications can assist practitioners in community development in myriad ways, depending on the needs and abilities of the users.



### ***Social Networking & CD Principles of Good Practice***

The potential for Web 2.0 to transform the field of community development is enormous, limited only by the imagination of users. In the field of community development, Addison (2006, 623) refers to this transformation as “Dev 2.0.” Indeed, the use of social media and social networking as a community development tool or practice has great potential to revolutionize the field, both from an applied and theoretical point of reference.

The use of social media and networking is significant as a community development tool in terms of building relationships, improving communications, documenting development efforts, sharing information in real-time, and informing and reaching a wider audience than was possible at any time in history.

Perhaps more importantly, social media can empower those who have the skills and abilities to use new technologies by helping them, as Bryant (2006, 559) notes, to “break away from ‘traditional’ command-and-control models of management.”

In this sense, social media and social networking can ‘level the playing field’ by allowing a larger segment of the population to access information and influence outcomes. In an age when information equates to power, a diversity of opinion can actually lead to more creative problem solving and more equitable outcomes. Thus, the use of various social media and networking opportunities applies directly to the Principles of Good Practice of the Community Development Society.

First, because of the nearly ubiquitous and equal access to social media and networking, citizens and practitioners alike can promote active, representative and diverse participation in community decision-making. With new social media technologies, active participation through web conferencing or other real-time information-sharing methods allows for interactive and hyper-responsive communication. With costs associated with information technology continuing to decline for many users, a more representative and diverse constituency can participate in various communication networks.

Second, using search engines and other social media opportunities, community developers now have access to more information than was ever possible in the past. Community development practitioners can now actively engage in learning and understanding about community issues, problems, and impacts with information literally at their fingertips. Historical documents can be recorded and accessed easily, allowing for more efficient learning and better understanding of policies and actions.

Third, social media and social networking can enhance the leadership capacity of community members, leaders, and groups within the community

through networking and power sharing. Information leading to decisions can now be more broadly disseminated and greater transparency and accountability can lead to increases in trust within and among various community members, leaders and groups. New and innovative Web 2.0 applications can promote online voting to allow more individuals to not only know intimately the specific details of various initiatives, but also be able to influence their outcome through direct participation or information dissemination to other constituencies via social networking.

Fourth, the use of social media and social networking can disseminate information and dialogue on a full range of strategies toward long-term sustainability and well-being in the community. By allowing and promoting broad and extensive participation in dialogue about sustainability, difficult questions can be addressed about how sustainability is defined and how to balance the schism between science and values often imbued in sustainability discourse. Community well-being can thus be widely discussed and debated regarding short and long-term decisions with ownership and responsibility widely shared.

Furthermore, use of social media and networking addresses not only community development principles of good practice, but also addresses some of the fundamental tenets of good governance and democracy by allowing broad participation, promoting effectiveness and efficiency in processes and outcomes, promoting accountability and transparency, and allowing for fairness and equity.



## The Future of Social Media for Community Developers

To say that social networking holds tremendous potential in the field of community development is an understatement. The use of social media and networking can literally transform the field in ways not well understood or even conceived. Yet, with the dramatic changes taking place and projected to take place (in terms of affordability and computing speeds), there exist significant challenges to practitioners of community development.

### *Challenges for Community Developers*

There are many challenges and limitations that prevent or dissuade use of social media and networking to its full potential in the field of community development. First, the cost of some technologies, particularly mobile devices and their often expensive service contracts can prove prohibitive for many users. While the costs of computing (i.e., processors, monitors, etc.) have decreased markedly in recent years, technologies that provide easy access to social media and networking sites can be beyond the means of those in poverty or for those outside broadband access. Subsidies and scholarship can begin to address some of these issues as well as the recycling of “outdated” but still functional hardware such as personal digital assistants or mobile devices.

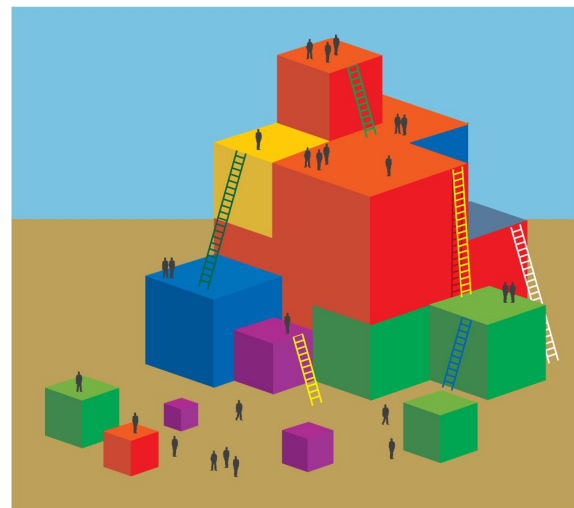
Second, the skills required to be social network-savvy can be overwhelming, particularly to those without much time to invest in initial learning. There are necessary investments in terms of setting up accounts, learning new software applications, and the consistent maintenance (i.e., reading and processing) of data that may prove overwhelming to community developers, particularly those with little background in related types of technology.

Further, community members with whom community developers wish to engage may not be comfortable and willing to engage in virtual communications and relationships as part of their community and civic life. The potential alienation of people through virtual technologies, especially those

who are already marginalized in communities, will continue to present a significant challenge. Significant investment by community development organizations, and the Community Development Society in particular, regarding training and skill-building, will benefit not only individuals, but the profession as a whole.

Third, there exists a considerable digital divide between the “haves” and “have-nots” that is neither easy to address nor uncomplicated to overcome. Clearly, there is increasing evidence that access to high speed internet connectivity is more readily available to urban populations than rural populations and ubiquitous access to web-based technologies is still an aspiration for many. As a consequence, social networking tools may be a more accessible or a more appropriate application in urban contexts. Recognizing this digital divide and the fact that urban community development is quite different from rural community development will be critical toward addressing many of these fundamental issues.

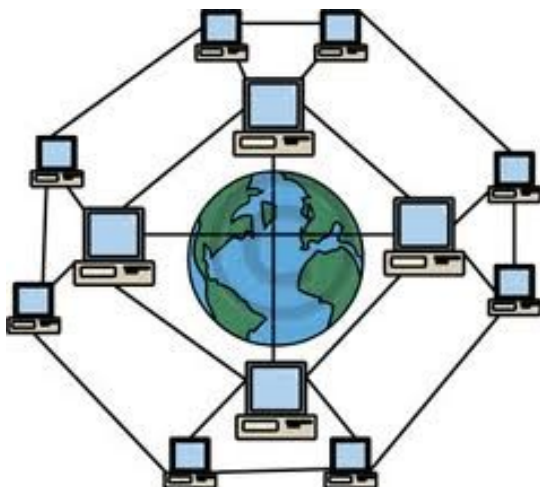
Fourth, social media and social networking can actually exacerbate divisions of perspective and may work counter to the collaborative goals of many community development efforts that promote inclusiveness and diversity. New web-based technologies may promote a more introverted, solitary,



and secluded populace with citizens either unable, unwilling, or uninterested in interacting face-to-face with their neighbors. Active citizen participation in the affairs of the future is described by Fischer (2000, p. 259) as the “*raison d’être* of democracy. Not only does [citizen participation] give meaning to the term, but it plays an important role in legitimating both policy formulation and implementation.”

For Putnam, (2000, p. 341) democracy in the form of face-to-face participation is essential since “citizenship is not a spectator sport.” New, web-based technologies may actually augment the atomization of the citizenry, resulting in further polarization, tension, and ultimately an inability to address many of the complicated and often value-based community development issues of our times.

Last, with the availability of seemingly immeasurable amounts of information accessible through social networking, the irony is that we have become lost in a sea of data. Web searches today can reveal an overabundance of information that may overwhelm the most technologically-competent community developers. A concerted effort to continually manage and organize information related to community development will only serve to help practitioners navigate the morass of social media related to the discipline. Yet, as these many present and future challenges present themselves, there are also many opportunities and success stories for organizing in the field of community development.



## ***Social Media and Networking Success Stories***

There are many examples of successful use of social networking in community development efforts. One initiative is the Netroots Nation ([netrootsnation.org](http://netrootsnation.org)) social networking effort that some community developers have used, particularly those involved in social justice and related progressive efforts. Netroots Nation provides online and in-person forums for exchanging ideas and learning how to be more effective in using technology to influence public debate. Another popular social networking site is Digg ([digg.com](http://digg.com)). Digg is a social news sharing, discovering, bookmarking and rating information website. Digg started out as a popular technology news sharing destination but includes a topics such as political issues, social issues and economic development.

## ***Community Development Society Resources***

The Community Development Society has made significant progress in developing and promoting various social media and networking initiatives.

The Society has now created a Twitter feed ([twitter.com/commdevsoc](https://twitter.com/commdevsoc)), Facebook page ([facebook.com/group.php?gid=6002603385](https://facebook.com/group.php?gid=6002603385)), email listserv ([CDS-L@listserv.unl.edu](mailto:CDS-L@listserv.unl.edu)), and website ([comm-dev.org](http://comm-dev.org)).

A new sub-committee, working under the Communications Committee has undertaken the design of a comprehensive strategy to begin to investigate current use and capacity within the Society, and potential for growth and development in both the short and longer-term. The author is taking the lead on this initiative and welcomes involvement from the membership or others interested in supporting the development of social media and networking opportunities in the field of community development.

## Summary

There are three closing comments as a result of this small research effort. First, the use of social media and networking can conform to and even complement the principles of the Community Development Society. The use of these tools has the potential to promote the fundamental tenets of the Society and influence how practitioners act and interact in the future.

Second, social media and networking, while having challenges, can if the many previously described obstacles and challenges are overcome, also provide a relatively simple, free, and ubiquitous method of communicating, sharing of information, and involvement of a diverse constituency in community development efforts. Continued work in

this area must progress to ensure these tools remain easy to use and understandable to practitioners, particularly with current threat to net-neutrality looming.

Last, the use of these tools has great potential to transform the community development discipline in ways that are likely unanticipated. Those involved in community development would do well to become familiar with various opportunities, to address the challenges outlined above in a coordinated effort, and seek new and innovative methods to use and apply social media and networking tools to transform the discipline in the future.

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CD Practice is a web-based publication of the Community Development Society. It presents innovative approaches, tools, and techniques that can be readily applied by community development practitioners.

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