

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION'S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A CASE STUDY FROM EDUTOPIA

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Abstrak: *This is a case study that elaborates how George Lucas Educational Foundation (GLEF), an educational institution that is broadly known as Edutopia, employes social media to advocate their learning strategies. Social media usage decision is determined by the strategic goals that organizations want to accomplish. Organizations should decide, whether they need to pick from existing social media platforms, to establish their own applications, or to use both. In this regards, Edutopia uses both its own-developed and existing social media platforms. Therefore, this study is aimed to: 1) elaborate the relevant advantages of each type of those platforms to its mission, 2) to study opportunities that Edutopia has to build relationship with its users though its forum and blogs, and 3) to analyze the functions of social media to understand the appropriateness of using different social media platforms. The data were collected using interview, observation, and documenting from April until June, 2014 and were analyzed using pattern matching logic. The results shows that both own-developed and existing platforms are beneficial for Edutopia as they seem to have different characteristics, target users, as well as different level of engagement. The study also shows that Edutopia's user engagement level was significantly high which meant Edutopia has been using their various social media channel to effectively build its community. Finally, Edutopia has functionally utilizes its social media to bring its mission to: 1) document , 2) disseminate, and 3) advocate its learning solutions to teachers, parents, administrators, education leaders, and other stakeholders.*

Keywords: *social media, community building*

INTRODUCTION

As social media have been used globally and intensely, the way organizations effectively utilize them to bring their missions becomes an important topic to study or discuss. Education is undoubtedly believed to be a field that should integrate social

media fruitfully and meaningfully. George Lucas Educational Foundation (GLEF), broadly known as Edutopia (www.edutopia.org), is among educational institutions that have been employed social media to advocate their learning strategies.

Edutopia is a non-profit organization in education field founded by George Lucas and Steve Arnold in 1991 (“Edutopia,” 2014). It envisions an innovative education sphere that involves students, parents, teachers, administrators, community leaders, as well as policy makers to improve education where students acquire 21st-century skills. With this vision, Edutopia have been making efforts to improve the learning quality in K-12 throughout six core strategies: Project-based Learning, Integrated Studies, Comprehensive Assessment, Social and Emotional Learning, Technology Integration, and Teacher Development (“Edutopia,” n.d.). Its mission is to improve education by documenting, disseminating, and advocating its learning solutions. One way it administers its programs is by building its education community that engages students, teachers, administrators, community leaders, and policy makers.

Edutopia uses a variety of social media. Integrated in the main website, it has its own-developed applications. First, it uses Blogs to

provide innovative learning solutions that focus on thirteen major topics. Assigned contributors update blogs regularly. Second, it also has Forum known as “Edutopia Community” that consists of twenty groups with 52,365 total forum members (Data retrieved on June 14, 2014). Each group has a facilitator that is responsible for administering it. If necessary, members of the forum may suggest additional groups.

Edutopia also joins existing social media applications such as Facebook with 353,087 likes, Twitter with 391,692 followers, YouTube with 25,664 subscribers, Google+ with 25,664 followers, Pinterest with 49,231 followers, and LinkedIn with 25,664 followers (Data retrieved on June 14, 2014). All of those social media accounts use the same username “edutopia” and the consistent profile picture/logo in its social media accounts. Edutopia has four staffs that are responsible to manage its social media use: (1) Director of Social Media Strategy and Marketing, (2) Online Community Manager, (3) Social

Media Marketing Assistant, and (4) Social Media Assistant.

Social media usage decision is determined by the strategic goals that organizations want to accomplish. Accordingly, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest that organizations should decide, whether they need to pick from existing social media platforms or to establish their own applications. For most conditions, using existing social media applications such as microblogging, social networking, or content communities is better decision. However, some strategic goals might not be accomplished well if organizations only join existing social media platforms. In this case, it is better for organizations to develop their own applications that fit their goals. Since Edutopia uses both its own-developed and existing social media platforms, it is importance to analyze the relevant advantages of each type of those platforms to its mission.

As mentioned earlier, Edutopia seek to engage students, teachers, administrators, community leaders, and policy makers. In this

regard, a study by Taylor and Kent (1998) has discovered that forum and other new emerging media such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs provide a chance to establish community building through two-way conversations. Since Edutopia uses its own-developed forum and blogs besides existing social media platforms, it is necessary to analyze opportunities that Edutopia has to build relationship with its users though its forum and blogs.

In addition, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) argue the important question of “how the information and dialogic functions manifest themselves on organizations’ social media sites (p.340).” Later, based on their study, the utilization of social media will be categorized into three main categories: Information, Communication, and Action (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Therefore, this essay also analyzes the functions of social media to understand the appropriateness of using different social media platforms.

Based on the literature on whether to use own-developed or existing social media platforms,

opportunities for community building, the functions of social media, and social media evaluation, the following questions are raised:

- 1: What are the benefits of using own-developed and existing social media platforms?*
- 2: What are the opportunities to build community through forum and blogs?*
- 3: What functions do the different social media platforms serve?*

METHODOLOGY

This was a case study that elaborated how Edutopia as an educational institution used its social media to promote its learning strategies. The data were collected using interview, observation, and documenting from April until June, 2014 and were analyzed using pattern matching logic. Creswell (1989) frames that a case study focuses on specific case in a circumstance that can involve an individual, a cultural group, or a portrait of life. Further, Creswell presents four characteristics of a case study: 1) the case is identified for a study; 2) the case is bound by

time and place; 3) use a various data sources to depict a phenomenon in detail, and 4) the study takes much of the time for describing the context and setting of the case.

In terms of data analysis, Yin (1989) classifies three analysis techniques for a case study i.e. pattern matching, explanation, and a time series. Pattern matching is used to compare patterns found based on empirical data with predicted patterns. Explanation is aimed to analyze data of a case study by explaining the case. A time series is utilized for a case study that uses experiment approach.

RESULTS

The Benefits of Using Own-developed Social Media Platforms

Edutopia has developed and managed its Forum “Edutopia Community” and Blogs as two main social media tools to support its agenda. Its blogs has the following advantages:

- Ability to post complex contents that incorporate text, graphic, and video. Involving various*

types of media and often engages users more than only a single type both in terms of its comprehensiveness and visual attractiveness.

- *Postings mostly include links to relevant resources such as downloadable files, videos, or relevant external blogs.*
- *Users can explore postings by the topics, the grade levels, the tags, or the contributors.*
- *Users can easily search postings within the blogs. When a user type a keyword in the search box, the results will be displayed and the users can click to open any postings.*
- *The variety of blog contents may drive traffic from search engine. For instance, when someone is searching an article in Google search about “tips for reaching out to parents”, he/she will find that the first result in Google search showing the article “8 Tips for Reaching Out to Parents” from Edutopia’s blogs.*
- *Users can receive blog updates regularly by signing up to the newsletter.*

Edutopia’s other own-developed social media is “Forum” which has benefits as follows:

- *Topics in the forum are categorized based on the groups.*
- *Users are able to join any groups they are interested in, start new discussions, comment on discussions or reply to comments.*
- *Users are able to ask for receiving notifications of specific forum discussion.*
- *Getting involved in specific groups in the forum for a certain period will amplify the users’ understanding of those topics.*
- *“Subscribe to this discussion” button on each topic enables users to receive notifications of the discussion updates. This feature will allow users to get notification of discussion update even though they do not start the discussion of comment on it.*
- *Less distracting compared to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Google+.*

The Benefits of Using Existing Social Media Platforms

Using existing social media platforms has following benefits for Edutopia's goals:

- *Ability to quickly spread initial interests to main resources in the website or blogs that could reach huge number of its users and their friends or followers. For last one month, there are 245,951 likes and 164,239 shares by users for 150 posts on Facebook. Meanwhile, 634 posts in Twitter have been retweeted 35,257 times (www.quintly.com).*
- *Since people have their own preference for social media they want to join, the adoption of different social media services help the organization to get through to and engage more users.*
- *Opportunity to target people whom only want to follow Edutopia on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Google+, or YouTube. Based on author's personal experience of following Edutopia in Facebook and Twitter, one may prefer to join*

Edutopia only on social media to receive updates of learning innovations rather than join its blog and forum updates.

Opportunities for Community Building through Forum and Blogs

Blogs on Edutopia provides practical classroom strategies, tips, ideas, personal stories, and innovative approaches. The blogs focus on thirteen topics. Numerous ways of using this social media application that enable sufficient opportunities for community building as follows:

- *Assigned contributors update and moderate blogs based under the thirteen topics mentioned before. In their blogs, the contributors associate their posts with the Edutopia's six core strategies and include links to relevant resources such as downloadable files, videos, or relevant external blogs.*
- *Users are able to sign up for Edutopia's Newsletter that lists blog updates. By getting newsletter regularly in their*

emails, users will always get blog updates.

- *Users are able to comment on any posts or to reply to any comments.*
- *“Like” button on each comment allows user to express their like to any comments.*
- *“Notify me of follow-up comments via email” button on each posting allows users to receive emails if anyone replies to their comments. This feature enables users to always get engaged with the blog posts.*
- *Users are able to share the discussion on many existing social media services.*

Edutopia Forum is a social media platform that Edutopia uses to build community. Through the forum, Edutopia aim to encourage teachers, administrators, parents, and others who are concerned themselves with improving education to participate in any of twenty groups. If needed, they also can suggest additional groups.

Several ways of how this social media application enables

sufficient opportunities for community building as follows:

- *Users are able to join any groups they are interested in, start new discussions, comment on discussions or reply to comments.*
- *Each group has a facilitator that moderates discussions. To play their role, the facilitators get involved in discussions and interact with group members in some ways. First, they comment to thank to members for initiating a discussion or providing a comment. Second, they provide links in their comments to relevant resources such as blog topics, downloadable files, or videos. Third, instead of arguing statements they disagree with, they ask further questions to stimulate deeper discussion.*
- *When users join a group, they will be notified automatically if there are group updates like a new discussion topic.*
- *When users participate in a discussion by starting a topic or providing a comment, they will*

be notified if there are discussion updates such as a comment or a reply.

- *“Subscribe to this discussion” button on each thread allows users to follow the discussion by receiving notification emails of discussion updates. This feature will allow users to get notification of discussion update although they do not start the discussion or comment on it.*
- *“Like” button on each comment allows user to express their like to any comments. Only users who have joined a discussion can give a “like” to its comments.*
- *Users are able to share the discussion on many existing social media services. If the social media service is not listed, they can add it and share the discussion contents.*

Functions of the Different Social Media Platforms

Edutopia uses their social media for the following functions. First, documenting is to writing

down, describing, and archiving learning solutions relevant to the six core strategies of Edutopia. It may take forms of (1) articles, (2) videos, (3) 3) downloadable files (such as assessment tools, lesson plans, etc), (4) relevant resources like external resources, and (5) ideas or experiences sharing by practitioners. Second, disseminating is efforts to spread learning solutions that have been documented. If the use of social media is seen as community building, “disseminating” seems to include all three categories of message function by Lovejoy and Saxton classification. Finally, advocating is not merely promoting or mobilizing users to take partial actions. It is more about promoting and encouraging educational stakeholders to finally apply those learning solutions as the goal. With ability to post complex contents that incorporate text, graphic, and video. Blogs is better in explaining and convincing users to adopt innovative learning solutions offered.

Edutopia utilizes its blogs and forum to function as services to “document”, “disseminate”, and

“advocate” its learning strategies to its users. Meanwhile, to extent the range and accelerate the speed of its “dissemination” function, Edutopia joins main social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, YouTube, and LinkedIn. This “dissemination” function takes three categories of forms—offered by Lovejoy and Saxton (2012): *Information, Community, and Action*.

DISCUSSION

The Benefits of Using Own-developed Social Media Platforms

Adopting social media platforms is highly affected by their characteristics, not only the use in general, but also the resulting tactics of use (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013). Edutopia has decided to use both its own-developed and existing social media platforms. Based on the analysis, both own-developed and existing platforms are beneficial for Edutopia as they seem to have different characteristics, target users, as well as different level of engagement.

Edutopia uses both its own-developed and existing social media platforms. This analysis presents the advantages of using its own-developed and existing social media that are linked to its mission.

Blog and forum have the characteristics to deeply explicate and discuss the practical aspects of learning strategies. Having a variety of blog postings or forum discussions will increase the visits from search engine. Vaughan (2012) states that the more contents are shared on the Internet, the higher the possibility people will find and visit. Based on author’s experience, blog and forum offer a higher level of engagement compared to Facebook, Twitter, or other major social media. Users can receive update from the topics they are interested only. In blogs and forum, users will not receive notifications for unwanted updates and they will not miss updates for subscribed topics.

The Benefits of Using Existing Social Media Platforms

Edutopia has also joined mainstream social media services

such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Google+, and LinkedIn in conjunction with its Blogs and Forum.

The adoption of various mainstream social media also brings complementary benefits for Edutopia. First, Pew Research Center expose in its “Social Media Updates 2013” that 36% of adults in U.S. use only one social media platform (Duggan & Smith, 2014). It means that adopting various social media will bring and engage more users. The most considerable strength is that the ability of those social media to reach a huge number of users compared to blogs and forum.

Edutopia’s decision to use both its own-developed and existing platforms is aligned with Kaplan and Haenlein’s (2010) statement that organizations should identify their needs and determine whether to join existing social media platforms to develop their own platforms, or both. In addition, Edelstein (2010) argues that identifying and attaching right platforms with strategic objectives is the right position to start. In this

regard, its social media practices show that Edutopia has examined the benefits of those social media platforms to help the organization achieve its goals.

Opportunities for Community

Building through Forum and Blogs

Waters, Burnett, Lamm, and Lucas (2009) show that there is still the gap between providing information and building communication in nonprofit organizations’ uses of social media applications. Most organizations, mainly government agencies, use conventional way of communication by transferring information to their audience (Durant, 1999). Only few organizations use two-way communication model in their social media adoption to build community (Kent, 2008).

However, Edutopia has been utilizing its blogs and forum well. Having social media persons has possibly influenced the well-managed utilization of its social media platforms in general. The features of blogs and forum such as comment and subscriber tools that

Edutopia have developed are aligned with the models of “dialogic components” recommended by Taylor and Kent (1998), the components that enable opportunities for the community building. In addition, the way Edutopia administers those platforms is also suggested by Kent (2008) that blogs should feed “issue framing, relationship building, fostering trust, and identification” (p. 37).

Functions of the Different Social Media Platforms

Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) state that there are three main categories of social media utilization. First, information is the basic function of social media like spreading information relevant to an organization’s stakeholders. Second, community is how organizations can foster relationships, create a network, and build a community. Third, action is to persuade users on social media to take particular actions by promotion and mobilization.

Based on Lovejoy & Saxton’s function classification of social

media messages, this essay analyzes what functions each of Edutopia’s social media platforms serves.

All the above social media platforms are used for their basic function to spread “information” to users. LinkedIn has the fewest updates among them and no message related to “community” category. Meanwhile, YouTube contents are all about resources, spreading information.

Then, a question might arise, “How about the blogs and forum?” A noteworthy fact is that the message classification by Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) cannot comprehensively explain how Edutopia use its blogs and forum. The mission to document, disseminate, and advocate its learning solutions seem to be more appropriate to analyze what functions the Edutopia’s blogs and forum serve.

CONCLUSION

Some challenges that organizations have are, first, to update postings at the right time, mainly in social media with overload information such as Facebook and

Twitter. Second, the incoming of new features on social media need a continuous adjustment, for example, such as hashtag, Facebook Graph Search, or even the new look of Newsfeed or Timeline. Third, to know what our followers are most interested in. It may be the nature of what we send out or the nature of what we send messages about.

Some recommendations can be implied from the previous analysis users will be helpful (Vaughan, 2012). For example, based on the analysis of Facebook updates, Edutopia get 300% more likes, 190% more comments, and 225% more shares, when the type of post is "photo" compared to "link". Therefore, the recommendation is to use type of photo to deliver important message.

Third is to produce trailer videos for learning strategies and important strategy practices, then to upload on YouTube with links to ain

and discussion. First, the success of social media adoption relates with users. It is important to understand what social media users want (Edelstein, 2010). Thus, Edutopia may include in questions, surveys, or polling in its messages. It can help social media team to optimize the use of social media for advocating eople to adopt its learning strategies. Second, knowing what are the popular types of messages to engage resources on the website or blogs. Trailer videos with no 1 to 3 minutes length usually much more engaging and may spark interest to users. Next is to share those trailer videos to social networking sites.

Fourth, Start to plan the improvement of LinkedIn and YouTube use for the function as community building. Initial step is to actively reply to users' messages. No response appears in previous comment will discourage new users to engage in conversation.

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