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To cite this article: Shane R. Brady, Jimmy A. Young & David A. McLeod (2015) Utilizing Digital Advocacy in Community Organizing: Lessons Learned from Organizing in Virtual Spaces to Promote Worker Rights and Economic Justice, *Journal of Community Practice*, 23:2, 255-273, DOI: [10.1080/10705422.2015.1027803](https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2015.1027803)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2015.1027803>



Published online: 18 May 2015.



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## FROM THE FIELD

# Utilizing Digital Advocacy in Community Organizing: Lessons Learned from Organizing in Virtual Spaces to Promote Worker Rights and Economic Justice

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*This article discusses the usefulness and challenges associated with utilizing social media technologies in the context of community organizing practice, often referred to as digital advocacy. We ground the analysis of digital advocacy in the context of a recent organizing effort undertaken by social work academics, grass roots organizers, and allies to support the boycott of Hyatt Hotels in San Antonio, Texas, by marginalized hotel workers and labor unions through advocating that the Society for Social Work Research relocate their 2014 conference from the Grand Hyatt, San Antonio, and to work toward better conference planning procedures in the future.*

**KEYWORDS** *community organizing, digital advocacy, digital activism, social media*

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## INTRODUCTION

It has been said that modern people are currently living through the “largest increase in expressive capability in the history of the human race” and this capability has the potential to be harnessed in countless ways (Shirky, 2009, p. 105). This is a time where networked communication is radically changing the manner by which people interact, access, and generate knowledge (Wesch, 2009). Others have gone on to suggest that people are not only living in an era where the vast storehouse of human knowledge is accessible from the phones in their pockets, but that digital technologies and web-enabled networked communication have shifted their digital experience to be participatory, rather than strictly focused on the one-way delivery or consumption of information (Watwood, Nugent, & Deihl, 2009). It is this participatory nature of today’s digital experience that holds incredible promise for social workers and the communities they serve (Schoech, 2013).

Nowhere is the impact of social media and digital technology experienced more than in the area of advocacy-focused community organizing (Hick & McNutt, 2002; Hoefler, 2012). This article explores our practice experience related to a recent, predominantly online, community organizing effort focused on assisting low-wage workers involved in an organizing campaign for fair pay and better working conditions at Hyatt Hotels in San Antonio, Texas. The focus of this article is on how social media and technology were successfully utilized during the organizing effort to bring together social workers, academics, and allies from around the world to challenge the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) to relocate their 2014 conference. The goal of this article is to provide some modest guidance to community organizers seeking to better understand the benefits and challenges associated with utilizing social media and technology in the context of organizing practice.

## BACKGROUND

Although rarely addressed in the community-organizing literature, the potential power of social media and other digital technologies (examples include clouds, Web 1.0, etc.) in the context of community organizing are especially promising within social advocacy/action, and capacity building modes of practice (Hoefler, 2012; Schoech, 2013). Despite only modest discussion in the literature of community organizing to support the use of social media and technology in practice, prominent examples of social media contributions in social movements have been described, as is evident in the Arab Spring uprising (Ghonim, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012) and the Invisible Children video campaign “KONY2012,” which was particularly successful at engaging the public with a viral video that went on to become one of the

most viewed Internet videos in the history of social media (Guo & Saxton, 2014). These examples, and others, demonstrate the democratizing power of the Internet to allow organizations, communities, and/or individuals to engage in community organizing through and with the use of social media and technology, often referred to as *digital advocacy*.

Recently, another case highlighting the usefulness of social media and technology in community organizing emerged in social work. During the fall of 2013, through early 2014, social work professionals, academics, and allies came together in solidarity, largely through social media and digital technologies, with the labor organization UNITE HERE and low-wage workers of Hyatt Hotels in San Antonio, Texas (Hooper, 2013). This highly virtual community-organizing effort helped bring social work academics, professionals, and allies together in support of marginalized Hyatt workers by advocating for the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR), a major research-focused social work organization, to honor the local boycott of San Antonio Hyatt Hotels by relocating their 2014 annual conference, as well as how to improve future conference planning processes and contracts to protect the organization's interests, while also honoring its obligation to the values and ethics of the social work profession (UNITE HERE, 2014).

UNITE HERE, along with hospitality workers at Hyatt Hotels in San Antonio, have been actively engaged in a campaign to challenge low pay, poor working conditions, and antiunion practices of Hyatt for over 5 years (Justice at Hyatt, 2012). SSWR had an existing and binding contract with Hyatt Hotels that ran through the 2014 conference; however, despite this binding contract, many members of the professional and academic social work communities, along with allies from around the world, took issue with a social work conference violating an active boycott rooted in economic and social justice (Hooper, 2013). This recent case provides critical insights about both the benefits and challenges of actively utilizing social media and web-based technologies within and throughout a community organizing effort. This case study and analysis also provides a glimpse into a community organizing advocacy effort that was neither ideal nor textbook, according to traditional community organizing perspectives; however, organizers involved were able to deal with emerging changes and challenges to attain some successful outcomes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the context and importance of social media and web technologies to community organizing practice in the case discussed here, it is important to understand what constitutes community organizing theory in this case study. Additionally, a brief history of the emergence and use of social media and web technologies will be provided to better

understand how social media has progressed from a predominant tool for social interaction to an important tool for organizing practice. Although much of the literature on social media and web-based technology comes from outside areas, we provide examples of social media and various web technologies in the context of organizing, advocacy, and activism whenever possible.

## Community Organizing

Community organizing has historical roots as a mechanism for challenging injustice through collective advocacy and action (Brown, 2006; Gantz, 2006; Garvin & Cox, 2001; Piven & Cloward, 1977; Rothman, 2007; Sen, 2003). *Community organizing* is a term that is broadly applied to the purposeful bringing together of people for the purpose of bringing about some level of social change (Netting, Kettner, & McMurtry, 2008). Although the term *community organizing* may be applied to many different types of community practice activities, we discuss it from within the context of capacity-centered and social advocacy modes of community practice. Rothman (2007) described community organizing with empowerment goals and an emphasis on collaboration as capacity building. Additionally, Rothman (2007) described organizing activities with the aim of disrupting the status quo through direct action as social advocacy. Rothman and others have also concluded that community organizing efforts often involve the mixing of various types of organizing to adapt to the context of practice (Gamble & Weil, 2010; Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocur, 2004; Rothman, 2007). One of the traits of social-advocacy-based community organizing, especially when undertaken by grassroots organizations or groups, is the emergent nature of practice (Brown, 2006; Kahn, 2010; Sen, 2003). Often times, injustice can arise in communities and force communities, as well as practitioners, to react quickly to address issues in a timely manner (Bobo, Kendall, & Max, 2001). Although community organizing rooted in a traditional paradigm may value rational planning processes, traditional quantitative evaluation, and expert leadership, grassroots activism and community-centered organizing is dialectical in nature, rooted in the understanding that community organizing processes will need to change throughout an effort as a result of newly identified goals, allies, and challenges (Thomas, O'Connor, & Netting, 2011). Although community building, engagement, awareness raising, planning, mobilization, and evaluation of efforts is important across organizing perspectives or modes, as Rothman (2007) referred to them, community-centered, grassroots, and social-advocacy-based community organizing will often anticipate and accept that real world organizing efforts will seldom mirror the best practices discussed in textbooks and literature (Alinsky, 1971; Brady & O'Connor, 2014; Kahn, 2010). To attend to these characteristics and challenges, organizers involved in grassroots advocacy efforts will often rely

on organizing strategies that are less rigid and adaptable to the changing climate of organizing practice (Young, 2013; Thomas et al., 2011).

### The Emergence of Digital Advocacy

Advocacy is a core function of community organizing and is implemented at various levels to impact a variety of systems (J. McNutt, 2011). Advocacy includes activities and strategies such as lobbying, direct organizing, public education, policy advocacy, coalition building, and many other (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014; Dunlop & Fawcett, 2008; FitzGerald & McNutt, 1999; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Jansson, 1994). Recently, and because of the emergence of information communication technologies such as cell phones, mobile devices, and the Internet, new terms and techniques have been developed from across professional disciplines to include the use of these technologies within advocacy and activism (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009). Terms such as *digital advocacy*, *digital activism*, *online social movement*, *cyber-activism*, and *e-advocacy* now proliferate throughout the literature (FitzGerald & McNutt, 1999). Electronic advocacy utilizes a wide range of techniques, including e-mail, discussion boards, web sites, fax, video conferencing, and other web-based tools (J. G. McNutt & Boland, 1999; J. G. McNutt & Menon, 2008). For the purposes of this article, we use the term *digital advocacy* to represent the tools, techniques, and strategies of traditional advocacy-focused community organizing, which combines a variety of social media and related web-based technologies within the context of community organizing. *Social media* and *technology* in this article are used not only to refer to well-known social media tools, such as Facebook and Twitter, but, also to other digital tools or web-based technologies such as web conference calls, clouds, e-mail, and other related technologies.

The adoption of digital advocacy in professional practice, nonprofit organizations, and grassroots communities has taken place slowly, over time, with challenges as well as benefits to incorporating social media and web-based technology into advocacy (Dunlop & Fawcett, 2008; Guo & Saxton, 2014; J. G. McNutt, 2006; J. G. McNutt & Menon, 2008). For instance, studies conducted by Greenberg and MacAulay (2009) and Guo and Saxton (2014) suggest that, despite the emerging research on the use of technology for advocacy, nonprofit organizations have not utilized the full capacity of social media to their benefit. Additionally, Edwards and Hofer (2010) analyzed the web sites of 111 nonprofit organizations and identified only 57% that contained advocacy-related content; however, more than one-fifth of the sample had no social-media related tools for advocacy (Edwards & Hofer, 2010). Finally, although social media and digital advocacy have been embraced by some in community organizing, others feel as though social media and web-based technology have contributed to greater apathy, often referred to by the term *digital slacktivism* (Knibbs,

2013). *Digital slacktivism* refers to a growing trend wherein individuals use social media and web-based technologies for advocacy in lieu of traditional boots-on-the-ground organizing and action (Knibbs, 2013). Critics of digital advocacy view social media and other web technologies as promoting a false sense of accomplishment and altruism among people, which comes at a cost to social change efforts that generally take much more investment of time and resources than is attainable by web technologies alone (Hofer, 2012; Knibbs, 2013). Similarly, Kohn (2008) also argued that social media and technology, although beneficial in many ways to current generations by way of helping to forge global connections and awareness about social issues, has also led to a false sense that digital advocacy alone leads to social action and social change.

Despite evidence pointing to the delay of digital advocacy within social work, other research suggests that social media sites, such as Facebook, Google+, and Twitter, can be incredibly useful for engagement with key stakeholders and awareness-raising (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Waters & Jamal, 2011). For example, Guo and Saxton conducted an analysis of 188 civil rights and advocacy organizations to understand how organizations use Twitter for advocacy purposes. They discovered that organizations provide public education, raise awareness, engage coalition building, and calls to action (Guo & Saxton, 2014). Social media and web-based technologies also provide opportunities for community building and mobilization, as individuals who are separated by geographic and even socio/political boundaries can come together in digital spaces and take action through tools such as online petitions, as well as mobilize in real time through planned rallies and protests that may be organized online (Hofer, 2012; Schoech, 2013).

Given the disparity in perspective about whether or not social media and web-based technologies are helpful or harmful to community organizing, further discussion, research, and education is needed. The purpose of this article is to better understand the benefits and challenges of social media and technology in the context of community-organizing practice through the utilization and analysis of a recent community-organizing case that involved the authors in varying degrees.

## OVERVIEW OF ADVOCACY EFFORT

Although it is difficult to assert with certainty the starting point of the organizing effort undertaken to relocate the 2014 SSWR Conference, for the purposes of this article, we deem that the online petition started by a small group of social work academics in consultation with UNITE HERE labor organizers was the first major action taken by organizers. Before organizers started the online petition, time was spent developing a strategy chart for the effort.

Strategy charts are preferred tools helpful for guiding organizing processes, as well as for evaluating practice in organizing efforts that seek to persuade a decision maker to change something (Bobo et al., 2001; Brown, 2006). Table 1 shows the strategy chart used to guide the effort to relocate the 2014 SSWR Conference.

The strategy chart in Table 1 illustrates the major goals of the organizing effort, as well as resources, challenges, allies, and tactics; each of which was an important consideration in this organizing/advocacy effort. The strategy chart was developed as a flexible guide by the authors and some of those involved in the organizing effort. Much of the strategy chart was put together through e-mail, telephone, social media, and in-person discussions about goals, allies, resources, and anticipated challenges. Short-term goals, such as identifying allies, building community, and raising awareness, were directly tied to tactics used early on in the effort, primarily through the utilization of social media and web technologies. Allies, referred to in the strategy chart as *constituents*, were identified through a variety of personal and professional networks, including the National Association of Social Workers, Social Welfare Action Alliance, and labor unions, through list-serves of program directors across schools of social work and by way of formal and informal networks of organizers. The targeting of multiple groups and networks to identify allies and constituents was a purposeful part of the organizing strategy, as it allowed for insiders and outsiders to work together. Insiders were those within academic institutions and more connected with the SSWR organization, and outsiders reflected activists, professional social workers, and others not intimately connected to SSWR (Morrison, 2014).

Tactics to meet short-term goals were implemented, in large part, through social media and web-based technologies, including e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, and cloud-based applications, as well as through the online petition to relocate the SSWR Conference on Change.org. The development of the online petition was one of the initial tactics employed, as it provided a digital space for allies to take public action by signing their name in support of relocating the conference. Additionally, Facebook and Twitter were especially helpful for getting word out about the issue and for sharing the petition with many people quickly. The utilization of other digital web-based tools, such as web chat, hangouts, and e-mail, along with Facebook groups, were also essential for building trust and rapport among constituents and allies. Much of the strategic planning of the effort was made possible through the utilization of Facebook groups, e-mail, and via Google Docs, which allowed allies and organizers to work together on drafting press releases, advocacy letters, and for providing direct input into the strategy employed in this effort.

The use of multiple outlets of social media was also important, because individuals have different preferences for giving and receiving information. Often times, social media tools were used for more than one purpose or



**TABLE 1** Society for Social Work Research (SSWR)/Hyatt Strategy Chart, Adapted from Midwest Academy, 2001

Goals	Resources and Contextual Considerations		Constituents	Targets	Tasks/Tactics
Short-term	Resources	Supportive SSWR members	SSWR President		Create online petition
• Identify allies	• Social media and technology	Hyatt workers	SSWR Board members		Create and circulate press release
• Raise awareness	• Passionate social work, academic, and activist community members	UNITE HERE organizers	SSWR members		Hold forums on the issue
• Build community among various social work and allied communities	• Organizing experience by some	Academics and/or educators	SSWR presenters		Use existing list serves and networks to raise awareness
Medium-term	• Relational power within member institutions	Social work professionals	Deans, directors and other administrators		Speak with media
• Build collective power among constituents	• Relationships with decision makers	Activists for worker rights			E-mail and call SSWR leadership to express concerns
• Persuade	• Other academic and professional organizations				Use social media to raise awareness, plan, and mobilize people
• SSWR to relocate conference	Contextual factors				Mobilize protests and rallies around the issue
Long-term	• No budget				
• 3SSWR will change current policies regarding conference planning to ensure that similar issues do not arise in the future	• No paid staff				
	• Internal conflicts between advocacy participants				

in more than one way. For instance, Twitter was utilized as both a tool for raising awareness about the issue and as a mechanism for advocates to come together for the purpose of community building and mobilization. In addition, at the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Annual Program Meeting, which took place before the SSWR Conference, Twitter was used as a tool for raising awareness and as a means to agitate key decision-makers and persons with power and influence, many of whom attend both CSWE and SSWR each year. The term *Guerilla Tweeting* was coined by the authors to refer to using Twitter as a tool of agitation. Advocates and organizers used the CSWE hash tag (#2013APM), created by CSWE for members to share conference experiences, as a means to raise awareness about the upcoming SSWR Conference. Advocates would tweet comments such as; “Got justice SSWR?” using the #2013APM hash tag to agitate SSWR leadership and supporters while also getting the word out about the Hyatt boycott/SSWR issue.

Additionally, Facebook also served multiple purposes in the context of the advocacy effort to relocate the SSWR Conference. Facebook was not only used for creating dialogue and for raising awareness, but also as an important tool for mobilizing advocates across the country and within their respective schools and communities. Facebook provided a space for organizers and allies to plan actions with one another with greater privacy than other social media can typically provide. Facebook groups are developed with added privacy features that allow them not to be seen by, or accessible, to people outside those invited to be part of the group. Finally, social work blogs and media were extremely helpful in getting out the message about the issues surrounding the 2014 SSWR Conference. One of the major social work media blogs, *Social Work Helper*, featured a story about the conference and advocacy effort, which contributed to even greater exposure.

In the subsequent sections of this article, we outline and discuss our conceptual framework for evaluating the success of the organizing effort, the impact of social media, and the lessons learned from participating in the effort.

## EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE ORGANIZING PROCESS AND OUTCOMES

The evaluation plan utilized in the advocacy effort to relocate the 2014 SSWR Conference was evaluated by organizers who began with the original goals stated in the strategy chart, tracked various outcomes along the way, and examined data from several different sources to determine not only the overall success of the advocacy process in meeting the goals set forth in the strategy, but also the impact of social media on the process and outcomes. [Table 2](#) represents the evaluation framework utilized by organizers of the advocacy effort.

**TABLE 2** Evaluation Framework

Goals	Outcomes	Observations and Data
Short-term	Petition signed by nearly 1,200 people Over 15 nations and 44 states represented by petition signers Through social media, blogs, and e-mail, the petition and issue reached many people	Petition signers counted Number of nations and states counted
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify allies</li> <li>Raise awareness</li> </ul>		Social media numbers examined by data mining major social media sites, Facebook, and Twitter for mention of the petition and Hyatt/SSWR issue to understand basic reach and engagement analytics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build community among various social work and allied communities</li> </ul>	Thousands of people engaged in the advocacy effort in some form	Comments left by over 200 petition signers (17.4%) were analyzed to better understand who and why people signed the petition
Medium-term	SSWR at the onset of the effort refused to relocate the conference, but eventually agreed to relocate almost all conference activities outside of the Hyatt Hotel	SSWR public statements were analyzed to determine what, if anything, changed among SSWR leadership perceptions about the Hyatt boycott and conference over the course of the advocacy effort
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SSWR will relocate conference</li> </ul>	SSWR has stated that they will continue to examine policies and contract language moving forward in order to avoid similar issues Forum held at 2014 SSWR Conference for advocates to meet with one another as well as with Hyatt workers and UNITE HERE members	Social Work Helper published interviews were analyzed to better understand differing perspectives about the SSWR/Hyatt issues and outcomes
Long-term	Articles written in Labor Notes and Social Work Helper to draw attention to the importance of worker rights, social justice, and the social responsibility of social work organizations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SSWR will change current policies regarding conference planning to ensure that similar issues do not arise in the future</li> </ul>		Ongoing journal maintained by petition originator and organizer provided accurate timeline of events in advocacy/organizing process

*Note.* SSWR = Society for Social Work Research.

Table 2 illustrates the short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals of the organizing effort to relocate the SSWR Conference, along with the observed outcomes of the effort and data sources. To evaluate the short-term outcomes of identifying allies, raising awareness, and building community, the online petition and organizer observations serve as the primary data sources for analyzing these goals. Through an examination of nearly 1,200 petition signers, we determined that individuals from 15 different countries on six different continents, along with individuals from 44 out of 50 states signed the online petition asking SSWR to relocate the conference. The major theme associated with the comments left by 17% of petition signers indicated that social work values and values related to social responsibility are why signers believed that SSWR should relocate the conference. Although far from definitive, the online petition numbers indicated that the short-term goals of identifying allies and building some sense of community around common values was successfully achieved. The short-term goal of raising awareness about the injustices experienced by San Antonio Hyatt workers and the issue of holding the annual SSWR Conference at a Hyatt Hotel under boycott was achieved widely through the use of social media.

Basic data-mining of Twitter posts related to the effort to relocate the SSWR Conference revealed that the top 10 Twitter users involved in the advocacy effort had a total of 8,730 followers. The top 10 Facebook users involved in the effort had a total of 3,484 friends, to whom they shared the online petition and information about the effort. Additionally, the blog *Social Work Helper*, which also ran coverage about the issue, has over 25,000 followers. This means that, even conservatively, it is likely that tens of thousands of people heard about the issue via social media channels. Finally, although reach is one metric for evaluating awareness through social media, engagement is the most important measure as it relates to how many people become actively involved in the organizing effort (Hoefer, 2012). Active engagement was evaluated in this effort by analyzing how many people signed the petition, shared the petition, posted blogs about the issue, commented on social media forums, and shared messages related to the effort. This advocacy effort was quite successful in demonstrating engagement via social media, as evidenced by the nearly 1,200 individuals who signed the petition, 300 shares of the online petition, and more than 500 mentions of the Hyatt/Worker SSWR effort through various social media sites. These figures indicate that a known 2,000 individuals were engaged via social media in the advocacy effort to relocate the 2014 SSWR Conference.

The major medium-term goal of the Hyatt/SSWR advocacy effort was to relocate the 2014 SSWR Conference. Initially, SSWR responded to the online petition on October 15, 2014, by stating that relocating the conference would come at too high of a financial cost, that it would put the organization out of existence (Hooper, 2013). After the advocacy effort persisted over several weeks, SSWR responded to the petition signers and public

on November 7, 2014, indicating that although the official venue for the 2014 SSWR Conference would remain at the Grand Hyatt San Antonio, several outside venues would be utilized for the majority of conference events and presentations. Additionally, although SSWR indicated that the Grand Hyatt San Antonio was still the official conference site by way of communication to members and participants of the conference, participant observation from those who attended the conference, along with the final published program for the conference, reveals that all accepted presentations, panels, and major conference events were held outside the Grand Hyatt Hotel. Although some organizers may view this outcome as mixed, given the refusal of SSWR to acknowledge any wrong-doing, many organizers actively involved in the effort, including us, view the relocation of all major conference events as evidence of successfully meeting the most pressing goal of this advocacy effort.

The long-term goal of the Hyatt/SSWR advocacy effort was to persuade SSWR to examine current policies and practices related to conference planning and to make necessary changes to minimize the likelihood of similar issues arising in the future. In communications from SSWR in November of 2013, the organization indicated that it had planned a forum to discuss the importance of economic justice for the 2014 conference (Hooper, 2013). Additionally, the organization stated in a 2013 interview that it was currently seeking the help of legal counsel to ensure that future conference contracts have more flexibility for dealing with issues such as labor disputes (Hooper, 2013). Although the long-term goal of organizational policy change within SSWR is still in progress, steps have been taken by SSWR toward enacting better policies related to conference planning and venues in the future.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Throughout the organizing effort to support marginalized hospitality workers by advocating that SSWR relocate their 2014 conference from the San Antonio Hyatt Hotel under boycott, social media played a key role. As a result of the emergence of this organizing effort online, which also led to boots-on-the-ground organizing, benefits and challenges related to using social media and technology were experienced by organizers. The lessons learned through this case are predominantly from within the sphere of community-organizing practice; however, we recognize the intimate connection between community practice and social work education and invite educators to take away what they will from this case for use in the classroom. We also acknowledge that although this organizing effort achieved some successful outcomes, it did not follow a textbook-perfect process but, instead, provided an illustration of typical real world community organizing, which can often be messy and imperfect. We encourage educators, students, and practitioners to critically

analyze this case to highlight and learn from the challenges experienced by the organizers involved in the effort.

### Utilizing Social Media in Organizing Practice

The organizing effort to relocate the 2014 SSWR Conference provided many lessons learned as they relate to the use of social media in advocacy-based community organizing. The biggest takeaway for practitioners seeking to incorporate social media into community organizing practice should be how and where to incorporate social media into organizing practice, as well as the benefits and challenges associated with different types of social media. [Table 3](#) provides some guidance about how various forms of social media technology can be used in the context of organizing and advocacy practice, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of each type of social media.

[Table 3](#) presents various types of social media technology that can be incorporated into organizing/advocacy practice. Most, but not all, of the types of social media listed were implemented in the organizing effort to relocate the 2014 SSWR Conference. Another major takeaway from this effort is that social media is most beneficial when multiple forms are utilized within an organizing effort. During the organizing effort discussed here, organizers utilized multiple forms of social media for various purposes. For example, the online petition often featured YouTube videos of Hyatt workers actively protesting injustices, along with links to blogs written on the SSWR/Hyatt issue and worker rights related topics. The online petition was regularly sent out via Facebook and Twitter, and the petition site provided organizers with an easy way to mobilize many of the engaged members of the effort through e-mailing by way of the petition site.

The multiple uses of social media also corresponded with boots-on-the-ground organizing, as many colleagues held forums at their schools and organizations to discuss the issue, placed phone calls to SSWR leadership, and held in-person meetings with key decision makers. We believe that social media technology provides flexibility and helpful tools to organizing and advocacy efforts, but careful decision making about what social media and digital tools and how best to use them should always be considered by organizers and advocates. Finally, social media, alone, should not be considered as a sufficient tactic within an organizing effort but, rather, as tools to help advocates carry out tactics related to an organizing strategy. Social media should complement organizing efforts, not replace traditional boots-on-the-ground community organizing.

Despite the many benefits of utilizing social media and digital-based tools in organizing practice, this case also highlighted challenges to using social media in community organizing. Although social media was utilized

**TABLE 3** Social Media Guide for Organizing Practice

Social Media Tool	Practice Application	Benefits	Drawbacks
Facebook (FB)	Engagement, awareness raising, planning/meeting, community building, allows posting of links to other social media, FB groups provide digital space for participants to meet	Large network, global reach, ease of use, ability to control privacy, space for groups to meet	Privacy functions difficult to use, younger people using other social media
Twitter	Agitation, mobilization, engagement, discussion forums	More public than other networks, preference of many younger people, useful for discussion forums	Privacy controls diminished, more prone to viruses and hacking, less user friendly, limits on length of posts
Google (Google+, docs, web chat, e-mail)	Strategizing/planning, engagement, community building, meeting platform	Many tools and applications, free web chat, free use of virtual cloud for document storage and collaboration	More to learn, Google + less useful than other social media platforms
Blogs	Awareness raising, engagement, policy briefs and information sharing, press releases	Outlet for getting word out about an issue, ability to engage others through dialogue commentary, some blogs have high levels of readership and reach	Accuracy of information questionable, some are not user friendly, criticized for not being direct-action oriented
YouTube	Awareness raising, engagement through posting footage of protests, meetings, and rallies. Public service announcements on specific issues, interviews with key informants and experts on issues.	Visual media can be more powerful than words, can be more accessible to persons with some disabilities. Ability to comment, large network of viewers, built in evaluation tools.	Not as user friendly as other social media, takes time to learn, accuracy of information suspect, time limits on video posts

(Continued)

**TABLE 3** (Continued)

Social Media Tool	Practice Application	Benefits	Drawbacks
Change.org	Direct action tool, awareness raising, useful in policy advocacy and direct organizing efforts	Tangible product created, active demonstration of opinion on an issue, deliverable to decision makers, helpful for evaluating impact of advocacy. Organizers and allies can see changes in number of petition signers. Provides easy way to communicate to constituent base at one time.	Takes more time to maintain to have success. Most local and state governments do not recognize online petition signatures as official for policy-making purposes; can give people false sense of taking necessary action when more work is needed. Many people inundated by online petition requests
Instagram	Documenting organizing effort, showing successes and injustices, useful in participatory based community research, speaking to power	Allows for participation without intensive writing, easy to use with cell phone, pictures can capture different aspects of social issue than words alone.	No real usefulness in planning, limited applications compared to other forms of social media
Wikis	Useful in planning and education contexts of organizing	Allows for posting and organization of materials as well as discussion.	Use limited to those members of the Wiki; less utilized outside of educational settings; clumsy to learn; not very easily connected to other forms of technology, such as cell phones.



by many individuals, not everyone knew how to use some or all of the various social media and technology. During the course of this effort, organizers encountered some allies who wanted to be involved but did not want to, or know how to, engage in organizing in digital spaces. Organizers made attempts to speak by phone, communicate through e-mail, and meet in-person with those allies not as apt with social media, but it is still likely that some potential allies chose not to participate because of the online nature of the effort. Another challenge to using social media in this effort was that although the attainment of most short-term and mid-term goals was successful, long-term goals may never be fully realized, as most participants stopped taking action after the 2014 SSWR Conference, feeling as though the work was finished. When community organizing occurs primarily in digital spaces, keeping people invested and actively engaged may be harder than in physical spaces, without having the personal bonds and relationships typically formed in boots on the ground community organizing.

The final challenge about utilizing social media and digital technology in community organizing is that people may become confused or come to believe that simply *liking* something, *sharing* something, or *signing* something via social media will lead to definitive social change. Although we support and promote the use of social media and technology in the context of organizing practice and credit them as being integral to the success of the effort to relocate the 2014 SSWR Conference, we do not believe that social media, by itself, leads to sustainable, long-term social change or attainment of concrete goals such as policy change, the winning of elections, or development of community organizations. If not for the boots-on-the-ground work of many key people in this effort, the desired outcomes may not have been achieved.

## CONCLUSION

Although the advocacy efforts leading up to and during the 2014 SSWR Conference were met with differing viewpoints across academic and professional social work communities, many positive lessons related to social media and community organizing can be taken from the experience. Although social media may not be a replacement for community organizing, it does provide organizers with useful new tools for practice. It is our stance that social media has the potential for many more benefits than drawbacks in practice. However, to fully utilize social media and technology effectively in practice, organizers must understand the various types of social media and technology, how to maximize their usefulness, and how to navigate potential challenges that may arise with the use of social media and technology in community organizing.

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