



The Value of Social Networking in Community Engagement

Chapter 6

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INTRODUCTION

Communities are not made up of unrelated individuals or groups; rather, they include “social networks” that comprise community groups or organizations, individuals, and the relations or “linkages” among them. Social networks are crucial to every aspect of community engagement, from understanding the community and its health issues to mobilizing the community for health improvement. A growing literature is highlighting the role that individuals’ social networks play in conditioning their health, and the emergence of electronic social media provides new ways to form and engage networks. For these reasons, we devote an entire chapter to the role of social networks in community engagement, beginning with an overview of the topic and then moving to a focused look at the new social media.

WHAT ARE SOCIAL NETWORKS?

As defined by Wasserman et al. (1994), “A *social network* consists of a finite set of actors and the relation or relations defined on them” (p. 20). Any one individual can be part of multiple social networks, and the nature of these networks and the individual’s connection to the networks can vary greatly. For example, social networks are not necessarily rooted in traditional relationships, such as kinship or clan, but can develop out of geographic proximity, work relationships, or recreational activities. Moreover, social networks can be described and analyzed in terms of their diverse characteristics (e.g., how many people or organizations belong to a network, how well the members of the network know each other, and how equal their relationships are).

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND HEALTH

Social networks can be a key factor in determining how healthy a community is. For one thing, they can create social supports that provide a buffer against the stressors that damage health (House et al., 1998; Zilberberg, 2011). Social networks may also have negative effects on health, however (Arthur, 2002; Cattell, 2001). Christakis et al. (2007), for example, found “clusters” of obesity within a network of people studied over time. Their longitudinal analysis suggested that these clusters were not merely the result of like-minded or similarly situated people forming ties with one another, but rather reflected the “spread” of obesity among people who were connected to each other (Christakis et al., 2007). Although not everyone agrees on how social networks affect health (Cohen-Cole et al., 2008), they seem to play a role, together with culture, economics, and other factors, that is important for both individuals and communities (Pachucki et al., 2010).

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In New York City, for example, one group tailored its outreach and education programs on breast and cervical cancer by determining how differing cultural perspectives affected social networks. They found that for the Latino population, women’s relationships easily lent themselves to the helper role, but that access to and utilization of health care in this population were mediated by men. Therefore, they included both genders in their intervention (Erwin et al., 2007).

Social networks can also play an important part in community health improvement because of their role in the “diffusion of innovation” — a concept introduced in Chapter 1 — and in the generation of social capital, defined by Putnam (1995) as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 66). A critical first step in engaging communities is identifying networks, such as faith communities, whose “social capital” can be employed in collective approaches to improving community health.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Chapter 4 outlined four practice elements for development of a constituency (know the community, establish strategies, build networks, and mobilize communities) and used them to conceptualize the tasks of community engagement (Hatcher et al., 2008). In this chapter, we will use these four elements to describe the role and importance of social networks in community engagement.

Know Communities

Learning about a community, whether it is defined geographically or by a common interest (for example, a health condition or disease) means knowing the community’s cultures and institutions, its capabilities and assets, and its health needs and challenges. Typically, learning about a community requires a variety of approaches, including gathering existing data and generating new information, combining qualitative and quantitative data, and incorporating the perspectives of a broad spectrum of individuals, organizations, and groups.

Understanding a community’s social networks is essential because of their potential to affect population health. Social networks can also provide access to a community and generate knowledge of its characteristics. For example, traditional healers may be widely known within Hmong or Latino networks but unknown to those outside these social networks, including those working in health care institutions in the same community. It is only by bridging to the relevant networks that health care workers can learn about these traditional healers.

Social network analysis (SNA) is a method that can be used to evaluate community engagement and assess communities. By providing a way of describing the diversity of networks and a set of tools for visually representing and quantifying the characteristics of a network, SNA can help partners understand a community's networks and track how they grow and change over time. This methodology is discussed further in Chapter 7.

Establish Positions and Strategies

Social networks represent important groups of constituents in any community health planning initiative. These groups can be engaged to provide feedback, identify priorities and opportunities, establish positions on issues and approaches, and plan strategies for intervention. Both obtaining knowledge *about* social networks and gathering knowledge *from* such networks are essential to the development of relevant strategies for health improvement. In addition, social networks are a means of communication, creating a platform for sharing and discussing potential positions and strategies.

Build and Sustain Networks

Building and sustaining networks of individuals and entities for community health improvement or research includes establishing and maintaining communication channels, exchanging resources, and coordinating collaborative activities. Existing social networks can be effective and efficient platforms for efforts in community engagement if they reach people who are central to these efforts and if their members share the goals of the engagement efforts. Through the community engagement process, new networks can be developed as well.

Mobilize Constituencies

Ultimately, partners and their constituencies must be mobilized to take the actions that will lead to improved community health, and mobilization must be sustained through leadership, communication, and motivation. As described earlier in this chapter, this is where the social capital embedded in social networks is of the utmost importance. Throughout the community

engagement effort, relationships must be strengthened and new capacity for collective action developed. It is important to reach out and pull in key opinion leaders and community stakeholders.

In one example of how this can work, a clinician-researcher at the University of California, Davis, used social networks to help reduce dog bites among children. After noticing that a large number of children were being seen for treatment of dog bites, the investigator identified social networks such as dog owners, school crossing guards, and neighborhood associations and engaged them in understanding the problem, defining workable solutions, and mobilizing the community to put these solutions into action (Pan et al., 2005).

ELECTRONIC SOCIAL MEDIA AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

The tools of electronic social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, can be used to track, support, create, and mobilize social networks; these tools have significant potential to enhance community engagement efforts (Fine, 2006). Social media venues have undergone a significant shift to greater bidirectional or multidirectional communication in recent years (Bacon, 2009), and thus these venues represent opportunities for health messaging that have yet to be fully realized. In addition, they provide new forums to raise issues, facilitate the exchange of ideas, and engage a larger community.

The Potential of Social Media

Social media tools provide a newly emerging mechanism for engaging a large and diverse group of participants, including individuals or groups that might otherwise be hard to reach or to bring together, such as individuals with a rare disease (Bacon, 2009; Fine, 2006). Social media also provide a forum for discussion that has important differences from face-to-face interactions. With social media, all participants have an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, responses need not be immediate, and time can be taken to review the thread of a discussion. Social media also provide opportunities to reframe questions as the discussion evolves (Connor, 2009).

In addition, social media can generate a discussion archive that is useful for revisiting opinions, information, and collective history. Furthermore, the manner in which social media are used by the community in the initial stages of engagement might be a barometer of the capacity to engage that community and success in doing so, facilitating evaluation of community engagement.

Generally, depending on how groups communicate, a broader group of participants can be engaged using social media than through traditional means, facilitating the process of establishing collective positions and strategies. Specifically, social media can provide a forum for interaction and discussion about both draft and final position statements. Clearly, social media also play an important role in building and sustaining networks by facilitating ongoing communication, social exchange, and coordination of activities. Moreover, these media can help build trust by providing venues in which partners can demonstrate transparency and openness. Meeting agendas, minutes, handouts, and questions (and responses) can all be posted and viewed.

Finally, social media can be a tool for mobilizing organizations and community members and, even more important, social media can help sustain engagement and commitment. Social media can also offer accessible sites to provide information about a developing engagement, such as its purpose and goals and who is involved (Bacon, 2009; Connor, 2009).

Cautions on the Use of Social Media

Many of the cautions about social media are similar to those for any community engagement activity (Bacon, 2009). For example, when appraising face-to-face interactions, we ask, are the responses honest? Will people have the time to participate? We need to ask those questions about the use of social media, too. However, use of social media raises additional concerns about who is actually participating and whether they are who they represent themselves to be. Building trust is essential for community engagement, and networking through social media alone is unlikely to achieve the level of trust needed for collective action. Rather than being seen as a substitute for in-person interactions, social media may be better viewed as supplementary or complementary, particularly in the early stages of community

engagement. Furthermore, social media should not be regarded as an inexpensive alternative to the in-person building of relationships. Like any community engagement effort, use of social media for communication engagement will take time (Connor, 2009). Overall, it is important to understand the modes of communication employed by the community of interest and then use those modes.

Time is a particular concern for the person who plays the crucial role of moderating a social media forum. It is the moderator's job to demonstrate that someone is listening, keep the discussion developing, and recruit and retain members. There are many ways in which an online community can be undermined, and it is the moderator's job to enforce the "rules of engagement." Once established, a forum requires regular attention. Given the pace of interactions in the social media environment, moderating a forum may require visiting the site several times a day (Bacon, 2009).

Recommendations about specific products have not been included in this chapter, because products continue to evolve. Furthermore, although the discussion addresses how social media can be used, the question of whether or when it is appropriate to use specific social media is contingent upon the nature of the individual project, available resources, and the appropriateness of the tool for the particular community. Given the resources necessary to involve social media, it would be a mistake to try to be "everywhere." Engagement is an iterative process; organizations should be selective, determine which media (if any) the community of interest are already using, and ask the community what approaches (if any) should be used and at what time in the engagement process social media should be introduced. Like all decisions about community engagement strategies, decisions about the use of social media should be made by engaging the community.

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CONCLUSION

Social networks are an important tool for understanding a community and mobilizing it for health improvement. New research literature has brought increased attention to the role that social networks can play in population

health, and the growing use of community-engaged health promotion and research has brought to the fore the potential for social networks to support collective action for health improvement. Moreover, the emergence of electronic social media has diversified the ways in which networks can be formed and engaged. “Networking,” whether in person or electronically, is not the same as creating, sustaining, or engaging a community; if done incorrectly, it can undermine rather than support collaborative efforts. The principles laid out in this primer must be applied to the use of social networks just as they should be to all engagement efforts.

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