

# Working toward Empowering a Community: How Immigrant-Focused Nonprofit Organizations Use Twitter during Political Conflicts

Hanlin Li<sup>\*†</sup>, Lynn Dombrowski<sup>\*</sup>, Erin Brady<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>IUPUI, Indianapolis, USA, <sup>†</sup>Northwestern University, Evanston, USA  
lihanlin@u.northwestern.edu, lsdombro@iupui.edu, brady@iupui.edu

## ABSTRACT

In the digital age, social media has become a popular venue for nonprofit organizations to advocate for causes and promote social change. The 2016 United States Presidential Election occurred amidst divisive public opinions and political uncertainties for immigrants and immigration policies were a frequently-contested debate focus. Thus, this election provided an opportunity to examine nonprofit organizations' social media usage during political conflicts. We analyzed social media posts by immigrant-focused nonprofit organizations and conducted interviews probing into how they managed their online presence and social relations. This study finds that these nonprofit organizations adopted three key strategies to support their target community: 1) *disseminating content about immigration-related issues and policies*; 2) *calling for participation in collective endeavors to influence the political climate*; 3) *engaging in conversations with outside stakeholders including political actors, media, and other organizations*. We use empowerment theory, which has been used widely to study marginalized populations, as a theoretical lens to discuss how NPOs' social media usage on Twitter reflects their endeavors to bring information and calls to action to immigrant communities. We, then, present design opportunities to amplify the advantages of social media to help nonprofit organizations better serve their communities in times of political upheavals.

## Author Keywords

Social media; nonprofit organizations; politics; empowerment theory.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## INTRODUCTION

Social media is a popular resource used by nonprofit

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organizations (NPOs) to communicate with various stakeholders and advance social causes [20]. However, such social media use largely depends on the causes that NPOs focus on and the related political climate [13]. Knowledge about how NPOs use social media during political conflicts can advance our understanding of NPOs' computer-mediated communication. How do these NPOs respond to political news in online spaces? What calls-to-action do they propose to affect political uncertainties? How do NPOs use social media to benefit their communities?

The 2016 presidential election in the United States provided an ideal opportunity to address our inquiries. In the past years, presidential elections in the United States and overseas have prompted researchers to analyze and understand the ever-changing dynamics on social media, focusing on specific social issues [11,18,24,46]. Immigration became one focal point of discussion during the 2016 election year in the United States [38]. The polarized opinions on immigration across presidential candidates led to divisive voices among the general public, organizations, government agencies, and immigrant communities. Seeing a series of election-related political events and the prevalence of social media-mediated debates online, our study chose to focus on immigrant-focused NPOs to understand how such NPOs' social media use reflects their public engagement and support for immigrant communities.

Our mixed-method study combined social media data analysis with a qualitative interview study, focusing on how immigrant-focused NPOs used Twitter during the 2016 presidential election and the transition between two presidential administrations. We examined 36 NPOs' tweets and interviewed eight participants who managed their organizations' social media accounts to analyze how such NPOs use Twitter in a politically polarized context.

The results show a variety of strategies adopted by NPOs on social media to support the immigrant population in the United States while they were exposed to amplified political conflicts during the 2016 presidential election. Strategies included 1) *disseminating content about immigration-related issues and policies*; 2) *calling for participation in collective endeavors to influence the political climate*; and 3) *engaging in conversations with outside stakeholders including political actors, media, and*

*other organizations.* These findings are further examined through the lens of community empowerment theory, which shows that nonprofits' social media use reflects their effort to empower the communities they serve through three approaches: *asking why and problem analysis, calls for participation, and reaching out to outside agents* [30].

The contribution of this work is two-fold. First, we empirically situate community empowerment theory in a social computing ecosystem. We provide evidence that NPOs applied a variety of methods in an effort to empower their communities through social media. The second fold of our contribution is practical. By investigating NPOs' social media use, we explore the advantages and limitations of current information technology for advocacy in the nonprofit sector. Our study provides design implications for existing socio-technical systems to better facilitate NPOs' efforts in promoting social and political changes. This study extends prior research on computer-mediated communication, NPOs, and studies of civic participation around social issues and debates on social media.

## STUDY BACKGROUND

We chose our data collection period (from Oct 1st, 2016 to Jan 31st, 2017) to include important events that are related to the presidential election, including all presidential debates, election day, and the transition of two presidential administrations. As a historically important social cause in the United States, immigration became a focal point of discussion over this timespan.

The United States is the largest recipient of immigrants worldwide, attracting 20 percent of the world's migrants, with one percent (41.3 million) of the U.S. population as of 2013 being immigrants [54]. People emigrate from their homes due to a variety of economic and political factors, religious persecution or natural disasters. The migration exposes immigrants to an unfamiliar cultural context, which can be a disruptive event for many families [8]. Prior work has examined barriers that immigrants face from different perspectives, including culture differences, communication, health, employment, and education [27]. Although immigrants are legally eligible for many state-level and nationwide human service and health programs, barriers to accessing these resources still exist due to a variety of factors, including how the programs are administered, each immigrant's legal status<sup>1</sup>, and the general climate toward immigrant communities [37].

A growing body of HCI work focuses on various aspects of immigrant communities and has provided implications on how technology could be designed and implemented to support this population [8,9,23,43]. Such work has shed light on the role and opportunities of technology in

immigrant lives, particularly as they adapt to new education systems, seek healthcare, and communicate with others. However, to our best knowledge, there has not been a study conducted to explore immigrant-focused NPOs' technology-mediated role in supporting the immigrant population. Our study explored this domain by focusing on how such NPOs use Twitter in times of critical political conflicts.

## Legal Restrictions for NPOs

NPOs play an integral role in civic society through the provision of services to consumers [5]. However, their political engagement remains restricted [4]. There are two main types of NPOs in the United States – *501c(3)* and *501c(4)* – based on their tax exempt status [33]. The Internal Revenue Code 501c(3) means an organization “may not attempt to influence legislation as a substantial part of its activities and it may not participate in any campaign activity for or against political candidates” [55]. *501c(4)* means the organization is allowed to seeking legislative changes as a method of attaining their social welfare goals [56]. *501c(3)* organizations account for the majority of the nonprofit sector financially, contributing to over three-quarters of the whole sector's revenue and expenses ( \$1.73 trillion and \$1.62 trillion, respectively) and more than three-fifths of nonprofit assets (\$3.22 trillion) in 2013 [33].

## RELATED WORK

There has been a large body of HCI work in understanding how the nonprofit sector adopts social technologies in their work, from collaborative data system [51] to e-governing portals connecting with communities [50]. As social media becomes a prominent communication channel, studying the use of these platforms during political conflicts reveals how stakeholders cope with and react to debatable issues [4].

Our work builds on prior literature by investigating how social media content can illustrate the online behaviors' of NPOs during a series of political uncertainties and upheavals. Existing research in this area mostly focused on the generic use of social media (*e.g.*, [32] proposed an information, community, and action model as a framework using the most representative NPO social media accounts; [35] examined the internal factors that affect NPOs' social media presence). However, to our best knowledge, the NPO literature in HCI has not examined how they respond to political conflicts in the general environment through social media. Our study focused on a period of time that spanned the 2016 presidential election in the United States and the transition between two presidential administrations when political debates on certain social causes became heated. Understanding NPOs' social media use under such circumstances provides implications for technological design researchers, as social media could potentially be improved to better facilitate NPOs' work in a time when their causes may lead to divisive public opinions and create uncertainties or even crises for their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) for definition of “immigrant” in the United States.

Although not directly studying NPOs, recent research on social media use has demonstrated its usefulness in revealing public opinions on social causes. Studies focused on how other populations (including LGBT, racial equality activists, and Native American advocates) practice advocacy work through social media have been conducted [6,17,49]. There has also been ample work using social media data to understand, model, and predict people's opinions on political discourse (e.g., [24,46]). These studies revealed various stakeholders' efforts toward making a difference in a community and policymaking. We contribute to this body of work by providing knowledge about how NPOs use social media to get involved with communities and policymaking process.

Another line of research relevant to our study is crisis informatics, which shows how the general public use social media to deal with crisis-introduced uncertainties through engaging with government organizations, emergency responders, and media/news companies [40,48]. Such case studies around natural and manmade disasters supported social media's important role in emergent communication. In our study, a critical consequence of political conflicts is policy change that may cause crises for certain populations in society. Building on prior crisis informatics literature, we study what stakeholders that NPOs intend to engage with to address potential crisis under a political climate that may affect their communities negatively.

Combining existing work across HCI and communication fields regarding NPOs and social media provides us an opportunity to study how NPOs' behaviors on social media relate to the prolonged political conflicts and the possible approaches to manifest NPOs' work online.

## METHODS AND DATA

We collected social media data to examine how immigrant-focused NPOs used social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election to discuss immigration-focused issues. This data included their Twitter posts and metadata, followers, interactions, linguistic attributes, and temporal changes to better understand how such NPOs use Twitter. To deepen our understanding of how the sampled NPOs managed their online presence and social relations, we conducted eight interviews with staff in charge of social media channels. These interviews focused on the changes in their social media use during the election and their reasons, strategies, and decision-making processes, while using social media to discuss immigration issues and politics.

### Data Collection

We manually searched Twitter for accounts using immigration-related hashtags, such as #immigrant and #immigration. We screened for accounts that were affiliated with or represented an immigrant-focused nonprofit organization. Through this approach, 36 Twitter accounts were identified. We collected the accounts' tweets,

retweets, and replies from Oct 1st, 2016 to Jan 31st, 2017 with the Twitter Streaming API.

The interview participants were recruited from these 36 NPOs. We contacted all NPOs through social media and email and received eight responses. All eight participants were affiliated with one or more NPOs and in charge of managing their organizations' social media accounts at the time of interviewing. Their job titles included communication manager, outreach director, and social media specialist. The interview questions started with how they used their NPOs' social media accounts in the election year. Then, we asked questions focusing on the particular content they favor or tend to avoid in times when the public opinions on immigration become divisive.

### Data Analysis

Our data analysis consists of three components: inductive coding of interview transcripts, content analysis of a subset of social media data, and quantitative analysis of the whole social media dataset. As we analyzed our collected structured and unstructured data, our qualitative and quantitative methods helped to cross-test, verify and support each other. Below we provide details about our data analysis approach.

**Coding interview transcripts:** We approached our interview transcripts through an inductive coding process, where the first author used memoing and mapping techniques to identify emergent themes and patterns and discussed the codes with the rest of the research team [41]. The codes were iteratively revised.

**Content analysis of sample tweets:** We randomly extracted a subset of social media data, consisting of 7932 tweets, to collect evidence supporting our interview findings. This subset of data was analyzed through deductive coding, using the three-phase model – *information, action, community* [4,32] – as our major categories. We then approached each major category through inductive coding, finding themes that arose in each phase. The final codes we used can be seen in Table 1.

**Linguistic attributes:** Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) was applied to our social media dataset to investigate whether there were significant differences in organizations' linguistic styles. LIWC is a dictionary-based algorithm that can reveal emotionality, thinking style, and social relationships in text samples [44].

**Descriptive statistical analysis:** Our descriptive statistical analysis focused on the sampled accounts' followers, number of tweets, codes, and linguistic attributes to examine the differences in social media activity.

### Data Overview

The automated data collection resulted in 28,526 tweets from 36 immigrant-focused NPOs. The 36 NPOs' followers and frequencies of use varied to a large extent. Follower counts ranged from 161 to 49597 (Mean=8903, SD=2035),

| Phase                 | Codes                              | Example Tweet   |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Information provision | Policy report                      | “UPDATE: Executive orders have been signed so far. Nothing on #immigration yet.”  |
|                       | Clarification about misconceptions | “Every year undocumented #immigrants in Kentucky pay over \$38 million in state and local taxes.”                                 |
|                       | Educating about immigrant rights   | “Know your rights available in Chinese! Print & post in your neighborhood to help your community!”                                |
| Action announcing     | Call for volunteers & employees    | “TAKE ACTION NOW: 11AM, JFK TERMINAL 4. Protest sponsored by @thenyc + @MaketheRoadNY. More info: [link] #nobannowall”            |
|                       | Lobbying and advocacy              | “We denounce all hate against all communities who have suffered because of hate!”   |
| Community building    | Announcement of events             | “Our community call Jan 23rd @ 8pm EST”   |
|                       | Giving recognition and thanks      | “Thank you Senator @ChrisVanHollen for standing with immigrants and refugees and joining us today in DC! We are all #HereToStay!” |

**Table 1: Codes adopted from Lovejoy & Saxton's models [25]**

and the frequency of use ranged from 21.17 tweets/day to 0.04 tweet/day (Mean=3.05, SD=1.14). The frequency of use is strongly correlated with the number of followers ( $r=0.63$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). NPOs' numbers of daily tweets in total peaked when important political events occurred, including the three presidential debates, the election day, and Women's March on DC.

All interviews were conducted over the phone from December 12th, 2016 to February 11th, 2017. Interviews lasted 40 minutes on average and were later transcribed for further analysis in this study. Among all eight participants, seven belong to 501c(3) NPOs, with the remaining one (P4) coming from a 501c(4) NPOs. The significant fewer portion of 501c(4) NPOs identified on Twitter (3 out of 36) skewed our interview participants; however, we believe our open-ended interview questions about organizational types in all interviews were able to generate representative insights that allow us to understand the differences between 501c(3)s and 501c(4)s.

## RESULTS

Through our study, we observed how NPOs use social media during a series of political events including presidential debates, policy changes, and rallies that affect immigrant communities. We investigated how social media content is managed and what external factors affect NPOs' social media use under this hostile political climate. We focus on three key aspects of our findings: how NPOs 1) disseminate content about immigration-related issues and policies; 2) call for participation in collective endeavors to influence the political climate; 3) engage in conversations with outside stakeholders including political actors, media, and other organizations.

### Disseminating Content

According to our interviews and sampled tweets, NPOs use social media to disseminate critical information to both the general public and their community members. In particular, immigrant-focused NPOs use social media to provide informational support on immigration policies for their community members (e.g., “Join our workshop for

DACA<sup>2</sup>”, “Know your rights”) and dispel immigrant-related misconceptions, especially when the political climate began to grow hostile towards immigrants.

### Using Social Media

Consistent with previous studies [13,32], our participants from immigrant-focused NPOs described social media as a powerful broadcast communication channel. During our study period, because of political uncertainty during the election year, this communication channel is especially essential for NPOs to convey timely messages to their community members.

Our participants further described the value of social media to cope with political uncertainties in the general environment. First, it allows them to publish credible news to address any rumors or concerns that their communities may have under the unstable political climate. This is critical for those NPOs whose clients are sparsely located in rural areas and cannot make in-person visits very often.

*P1: “If you live in the middle of nowhere, it takes hours for you to get somewhere if you need help... They hear a rumor; they are not sure if it is true or what they can do. So social media might be the only way to connect with organizations and find out more.”*

Second, timeliness is of utmost importance to address any possible crises that may arise from policy conflicts and affect immigrants. Many participants described their efforts to post up-to-date information on social media to ensure their audiences knew what was going on. These efforts help their audiences know what actions to take and may prevent them from getting hurt by immigration policies.

*P3: “We have to be timely. We want to make sure the information is the most up-to-date. It could potentially hurt somebody. Especially for immigration policy.”*

Immigrant community members are not the only target audiences of the social media content. Participants also

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<sup>2</sup>DACA: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

recognize non-immigrants who are interested in immigration-related discourse as an important portion of their audiences. For this population, NPOs use social media as a way to further their readers' understanding of the immigrant population and clarify issues existing in current policies, summarized by one participant as "broadcast, educate, and advocate" (P4):

*P6: "It is all about the issues at hand and the policy that has been proposed... We try to clarify who people[immigrants] are and why we need to change things, and why certain policies don't work for people."*

Our content analysis of NPOs' sampled tweets further reflect the above-mentioned practices. Using the three-phase model from prior studies [4,32], we found the content published by such NPOs reflected their efforts in *disseminating information, provoking actions, and building communities* [32]. For tweets falling into these three major categories, we applied inductive coding and identified themes which arose in each category (see examples in Table 1). When disseminating information, NPOs focused on describing policies, dispelling immigrant-related misconceptions, and educating readers about immigrant rights. NPOs also are dedicated to announcing actions to further engage their audiences or show their standing. To build or reinforce communities, local events were announced on Twitter and recognitions were given to related stakeholders.

#### *Reservations about Social Media*

Our interviews further probed into how NPO staff members manage their social media content. Participants described the factors that affect their decisions about what to post due to amplified political conflicts during the 2016 presidential election.

The most important factor that is considered by all the interviewed participants is their organizations' tax exempt status. As mentioned in the background section, 501c(3) NPOs face harsher restrictions than their 501c(4) counterparts in terms of political engagement. Our 501c(3) participants described the external limits on their ability to show political engagement on social media, while 501c(4) status provides more leeway to take on political viewpoints and show public support for a particular candidate in elections. One participant from a 501c(3) organization expressed his workaround to address their legal restrictions. Because of its tax-exempt status, his NPO could not show direct support to a political candidate, but once the election result became public, they posted a tweet to support the elected candidate:

*P5 [501c(3)]: "For example, once she [a former senator candidate] won the election, I used our Twitter account to say congratulations!"*

501c(3) organizations also expressed other ways to show their political engagement while complying with the legal

regulations. To try to engage with policymaking, NPOs get involved with discussions on specific social issues, policies, and facts instead of directly taking sides of politicians.

*P7[501c(3)]: "We tell them [followers] where they can take action, we give them information. Make sure it is relevant. Some politicians said something, and we want people to know."*

P4, from a 501c(4) organization, expressed how the less restrictive regulations for their organization allowed them to be involved in political discourse. While many 501c(3) avoid directly criticizing a particular politician or candidate, this organization decided to take a specific side by voicing objection to a presidential candidate. The organization used Twitter as a way to direct their audiences to their website, where they analyzed this candidate's proposed immigration policy in detail.

Another key factor that influences NPOs' social media use is the balance of sentiment and objectivity. Most participants expressed their preferences to post positive content on social media, such as celebrating community achievements and acknowledging contributions made to immigrant communities. However, the furious discourse on immigration and disruptive policies occurred during the political upheaval require NPOs to remain objective and realistic. While most participants expressed the need to keep their social media content positive, the gap between this idea and the actual political environment is noted.

*P4: "We know that people respond more to positive content, so we want to keep our posts positive, but we have to be realistic at the same time."*

The 36 NPOs' follower counts had a weak negative correlation with the amount of expressed emotions (using LIWC's linguistic attribute, *affective processing*) in their social media content ( $r=-0.23$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This finding suggests that NPOs with fewer followers tend to express emotions more often. One possible explanation for this is that NPOs who have greater perceived audiences may feel obliged to remain objective. Because social media is public and often chaotic, different opinions can spark backlash, and thus lead to damage of NPOs' online reputations and images [21]. Participants from NPOs with a large number of followers on Twitter emphasized the importance of keeping the content objective and informative, instead of directly confronting people who have different views on immigration.

*P5: "We try to avoid arguments, especially with [political] leaders. We try to post news as we see them, but not respond to any explanatory, or exploratory information. Just what is happening at a state and local level. People are allowed to have their own opinion. We just want to inform them."*

Overall, we studied how NPOs used Twitter to deal with the political uncertainties caused by the 2016 presidential election and related political conflicts. Our work shows that NPOs' content largely depends on their tax-exempt status, and they use a balance of personal narratives and objective facts and statistics.

### Calling for Participation

Participants note that merely focusing on providing information on Twitter is not enough. To make real changes in political conflicts, actions are the ultimate goal of their engagement in social media.

*P2: "Social media is a tool. It should never be the only way to act. We are an organization that firmly believe that in order to make actual changes, it is wonderful if you do it online, but you have to be physically present. 'Oh I don't like this person', but if you don't vote, you are not taking the advantage to be involved."*

During our interviews, participants provided a variety of examples of call-to-actions, including making phone calls to lawmakers, signing e-petitions, going to town hall meetings, and joining offline protests. Using these examples, we further approached the collected tweets and identified call-to-action ones. 15 phrases (e.g., "register to vote", "call your [senator/congressional representative]", "join us/our") were identified, with the majority of phrases relating to the 2016 presidential election in the United States. Using such phrases as keywords, 1256 tweets were extracted from the dataset and screened as call-to-action tweets.

From the call-to-action tweets, we identified NPOs' various goals. Some actions are attributed to influence policymaking directly. Before the election day, many NPOs encouraged communities to vote.

*Tweet: "Your participation is critical. Deadline 2 register to vote is Mon. 10/24. Your vote has power."*

Other promoted actions that were not directly related to the election include making phone calls, writing emails, and joining town hall meetings to influence local lawmaking. During the time when Muslim immigrant communities were affected by a presidential executive order signed on Jan 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017, NPOs focused on coordinating actions to form rallies and protests.

*Tweet: "NYIC will be at #JFK all afternoon. 6pm join us for #JFK Immigration Detention Ral[l]y/Vigil #nobannowall #MuslimBan"*

Other actions were common-good oriented and aimed to support community members.

*Tweet: "Print & post in your neighborhood to help your community!"*

During our interviews with participants, we discovered NPOs have different focuses on call-to-actions. Smaller

NPOs who focus on local communities expressed an emphasis on community call-to-actions. National NPOs or NPOs that focused on online advocacy tend to use social media to advocate for political changes and raising awareness of existing issues that affect immigrant populations in general.

Another distinct difference among the sampled NPOs is the portion of call-to-action tweets in their general use. Through interviewing NPOs with various influences online, we speculated that NPOs with a smaller reach will also have a smaller focus on actions. By counting the portion of call-to-action tweets in each NPO, we confirmed that NPOs' number of followers was strongly correlated with call-to-action use ( $r=0.81$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

One possible explanation for this phenomenon is smaller NPOs' lack of legislative resources. P1, a member of a local NPO, expressed concerns with provoking actions as it could mean political engagement. However, another NPO with the same tax exempt status, 501c(3), has a team of staff with legal expertise to decide whether a tweet is to be posted or not. Future work is needed to validate this explanation.

Whether the various call-to-actions on social media were effective among NPOs' followers remains unclear. Participants have yet succeeded to conceptualize how many actions were taken when deploying a campaign on social media.

*P5: "We don't know how many people called, but we have an idea of how many thought about calling as they reacted on Twitter."*

### Engaging with Outside Stakeholders

Social media not only enables NPOs to initiate communication with their community members and the public but also provides a platform for participating in conversations with various stakeholders. Through investigating how NPOs leverage the networking functionality on social media, we gain an overview of how they engage broader stakeholders online.

#### Hashtag Use

Hashtags are a feature on Twitter that allows Twitter users to tag their tweets to be searched by broader audiences. It is an approach to engage with communities who are interested in the same topics; in existing studies about collective actions on social media, hashtags are identified as important in building and facilitating online communities [17,39]. Through examining NPOs' hashtag use, we found specific causes and communities that NPOs are focusing on social media during the study period.

In our dataset, 4263 hashtags were used. Several topics emerged from the most commonly used hashtags in the dataset. Through inductive coding of hashtags used more than 20 times (121 hashtags), we found four hashtag themes: 1) *general immigration issues* (e.g., #immigration,

#immigrants), 2) *collective actions* (e.g. #nobannowall, #stopsessions); 3) *presidential campaign* (e.g. #trump, #debate), 4) *miscellaneous* (e.g. #blacklivesmatter, #womensmarch). In Table 2, we provide the most frequently used hashtags along with the corresponding lengths of circulation. NPOs use several common hashtags when posting content, but may have more detailed focuses over time on specific events (e.g., #daca). Especially around critical events such as the release of immigration-focused presidential executive order, NPOs' use of hashtags suggest collective action emerging in a short period of time (e.g., #nobannowall).

| Hashtag       | Count  | Circulation (days) | Users |
|---------------|--------|--------------------|-------|
| #heretostay   | 3297 * | 56                 | 17    |
| #immigration  | 848    | 104                | 27    |
| #daca         | 670    | 10                 | 7     |
| #savedaca     | 461    | 4                  | 3     |
| #nobannowall  | 459    | 7                  | 9     |
| #immigrants   | 282    | 87                 | 20    |
| #stopsessions | 263    | 5                  | 7     |
| #notlmore     | 243    | 21                 | 8     |
| #debatenight  | 209    | 4                  | 7     |
| #womensmarch  | 194    | 6                  | 7     |
| #immigrantny  | 189    | 4                  | 4     |

**Table 2: The most frequently used hashtags**

(\* One NPO contributed to 55% of tweets that use #heretostay)

#### Leveraging the Networking Functionality

The hashtag feature on Twitter enables NPOs to engage with broader audiences, yet one-to-one communication is also prominent among NPOs' social media content. Because of the prevalence of Twitter, NPOs recognize it as a platform to connect and communicate with different roles.

*P1: "Twitter connects us with other organizations and advocates that work on this issue, also journalists and other media outlets. Twitter has been great to do these things."*

On Twitter, at-mentioning allows NPOs to mention or reach out to specific Twitter users. Table 3 shows the eight most frequently at-mentioned users. From this list, it is clear that NPOs are mentioning primarily presidential candidates, politicians, and government agencies.

While at-mentioning activities reveal NPOs' intention to call for attention from policy-related stakeholders, their replying and retweeting activities are much more complex. Such activities are generally intertwined with diverse roles

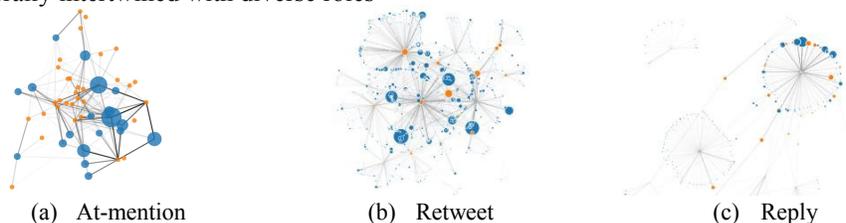
including individual advocates, fellow organizations, and mainstream media. While at-mentioned social media users tend to be unified across the sampled NPOs (see Figure 1 (a)), their retweeting and replying activities indicate varied focuses. In our Figure 1 (b) and (c), we can see that a few NPOs are located in the center of their retweeting and replying networks, indicating that they are the only ones had retweeted from or replied to the social media users around them. This finding suggests that these NPOs tend to have their own retweet sources and reply targets on Twitter, which may not be overlapped with other NPOs' choices. Through gaining an overview of the stakeholders that are involved in the dataset, it became clear that NPOs try to attract attention from or respond to a series of politics- and policy-related stakeholders through at-mentioning, retweeting, and replying. Meantime, NPOs use features like retweeting and replying to engage broader and more diverse audiences with their own specific focuses.

| Users           | Description   | Count |
|-----------------|---|-------|
| realDonaldTrump | 45th President of the United States of America                              | 389   |
| POTUS           | 45th President of the United States   | 287   |
| marcorubio      | US Senator for Florida.   | 195   |
| SenatorDurbin   | Senate Democratic Whip.   | 165   |
| HillaryClinton  | 2016 presidential candidate, women+kids advocate, FLOTUS, Senator, SecState | 130   |
| DHSgov          | Department of Homeland Security   | 103   |
| RepGutierrez    | Congressman representing the 4th District of IL.                            | 102   |
| USCIS           | US Citizenship and Immigration Services                                     | 72    |

**Table 3: The most frequently at-mentioned social media users**

#### DISCUSSION

We demonstrated that immigrant-focused NPOs use social media to further their mission by disseminating content, scaffolding action, and reaching broader stakeholders in response to amplified political conflicts during the 2016 presidential election. Our interview data highlighted how such social media content was managed and how content and activities were generated in response to the general political climate. To comply with the law, frequently NPOs cannot criticize politicians or take political positions. Instead, these NPOs find alternative ways to use social media to respond to pressing social issues and legislative policies.



**Figure 1: How NPOs leverage networking features on Twitter**

(Orange dots represent NPOs; blue dots represent social media accounts that NPOs reached out to)

In this section, using empowerment theory as a theoretical lens [53], we discuss how NPOs' social media usage in times of political uncertainties mirror their efforts to advance positive changes by empowering communities. Then, we provide design implications focusing on how social media could be improved for NPOs' communication with stakeholders.

### **Immigrant Empowerment during Political Uncertainties**

Empowerment theory describes the process in which individuals gain control over existing resources, political forces or personal capabilities [52]. It has been widely used to study marginalized populations, including women [10,16], parents of children with special needs [3], low-income neighborhoods [36], makers with disabilities [34], and larger populations (e.g., [28,29,31]). In the United States, immigrants are frequently considered marginalized because they typically lack resources, social capital, and influence on policymaking [27]. Thus, we found empowerment theory applicable in our study.

Zimmerman proposed that different types of empowerment theory, depending on the process, can be self-motivated, led by hierarchical leaders, or community-driven [53]. In our study, we draw from community empowerment, focusing on NPOs' role in community development on social media.

Community empowerment relies on community members working collectively to gain access to resources and to participate in community development and decision making [53]. Laverack's literature review of existing literature described how community empowerment is achieved through nine factors: "*participation; community-based organizations; local resource mobilization; asking 'why'; assessment of problems; links with other people and organizations; role of outside agents; and programme*" [30]. Considering the variety of work NPOs perform on social media platforms, social media use could be used to situate and test this framework.

In our study, we found: 1) NPOs' information dissemination regarding policy issues reveal their efforts in "*asking why*" and "*assessment of problems*" [30]; 2) their call-to-action tweets promote community members' participation in collective endeavors; and 3) the variety of networking features leveraged by NPOs emphasized outside agents' role in community development. Below, we enrich the literature by expanding the role of social media in community empowerment more in depth.

First, for communities to be able to self-direct, they first must be able to form group goals. Communities being able to ask why something happened and assess problems are critical initial steps towards forming group goals [26]. Through content analysis, our study shows that NPOs use social media to express their analysis of policies and issues, including causes of problems and corresponding solutions. By providing such information, NPOs keep their audiences well-informed of the latest news stories, policy changes,

and correspondent coping mechanisms. For immigrant communities, this is especially crucial for a variety of reasons, including lack of literacy of basic rights, language barriers, lack of social support, and financial limitations. Social media enables NPOs to deliver timely information to their communities timely, especially during disruptive events.

Second, community participation is another integral part of community empowerment, as community members take civic actions to improve community's power and resources [30]. Our analysis shows immigrant-focused NPOs encourage their audiences to take specific civic actions to influence the on-going political conflicts. Unlike previous studies investigating how NPOs use social media broadly, this study reveals that such NPOs encourage specific call-to-actions during political contentious times. As key stakeholders in public relations and social work, such NPOs provide general suggestions and guidance for the public to initiate certain actions through social media under particular political climates that may affect their communities negatively.

Third, addressing social issues like immigration require engagement from a variety of stakeholders, including the general public, fellow organizations, government agencies, lawmakers, and media outlets. Connecting with more stakeholders facilitates community empowerment by raising awareness of a problem's existence and negotiating common goal. This is especially critical for immigrant populations who are often left out in the policymaking process [27]. In our study, NPOs, acting as proxies for immigrants, leverage the at-mentioning, replying and retweeting features on Twitter to initiate interactions and develop connections with fellow organizations and outside agents. Such use of social media allows NPOs to call for recognition of the issues, and attract potential social resources for the benefit of their communities, as efforts dedicated to increasing community's power and voices in related discourses.

However, the aforementioned approaches to empower communities do not only lead to benefits. As our participants noted, because of the openness of social media, their published content may lead to confrontations with people who hold different opinions on immigration. Further, it may even cause backlash to immigrant communities and the NPOs, especially in times of polarized political debates. Another potential risk NPOs considered is the imposing legal restrictions for being over-involved with political activities as 501c(3) NPOs. Because of a large amount of news and debates in the election year, NPOs have to cautiously balance their involvement and goals to maintain sustainable informational services for immigrant communities. Overall, immigrant-focused NPOs demonstrated their endeavors to influence policymaking and empower communities through social media. Next,

building on our findings, we identify opportunities for technology to facilitate NPOs' work.

### **Design Implications**

In this section, we first highlight how NPOs manage and engage diverse stakeholders on social media. We, then, reveal key social media challenges for NPOs: the inability to signal impact made by NPOs and the risks of over-involving NPOs in political discourse. For each challenge, we provide design recommendations.

#### *Managing Stakeholder Complexity*

Our study shows that NPOs use Twitter to engage diverse stakeholders, including community members, public advocates, media outlets, and political actors. The mixed stakeholders may make some of NPOs' social media content irrelevant to other audiences, causing information overload. As Twitter users commonly follow content that is appealing to them [42], targeting multiple stakeholders via the same account may damage an NPO's potential online impact, and cause them to lose some of their existing or potential audiences. Having stakeholders choose which roles they play in the immigration debate (*i.e.*, *community member*, *volunteer*, *reporter*, *fellow NPOs*, or *policymakers*), or which kind of content they are interested in, would give NPOs a better understanding of who and how to interact with their stakeholders. Furthermore, customizing content based on stakeholder type gives NPOs an opportunity to disseminate more tailored content. For example, NPOs could choose to post community event information only to local community members. On current platforms, NPOs could develop unique hashtags which demarcate content meant for different audiences to help users choose to hide or engage with certain types of content.

#### *Signaling Community Engagement*

NPOs use Twitter to scaffold civic participation from immigrant communities and try to influence policymaking. However, it remains unanswered when and under what conditions social media is an effective venue for social change or not. This finding echoes prior work questioning the legitimacy of online advocacy and activism [14].

To signal NPOs' success in engaging relevant communities, Twitter could allow community members to respond to call-to-action posts, informing NPOs of whether an action is taken or not. As giving real-time progress reports is crucial to sustaining civic actions (by making them tangible, durable, and effective) [47], having community members confirm the actions they have taken could also make the collective efforts visible to more people, thus attracting broader and more sustainable participation. NPOs could use this intuitive data to help evaluate if their calls to actions were successfully directed. This may be especially helpful when NPOs deploy campaigns on different scales (*e.g.* statewide or nationwide). NPOs could combine this data with people's self-disclosed locations to understand how their online campaigns have unfolded spatially. From the

perspective of data practices among NPOs, this dataset would provide a clear and coherent measurement for NPOs' impact, and ultimately improve their data management to facilitate their organizational missions [7]. Designing for signaling engagement could help NPOs to better understand their impact on social media and thus better manage their staff's efforts in future work.

#### *Connecting Policymakers with Communities*

Prior work studying NPOs' social media use shows that NPOs work and interact with mainstream media, fellow organizations, and interested parties [25]. Our study further demonstrates how NPOs reach out to political actors and government agencies at the same time, who are the most frequently mentioned social media users in their tweets. The political environment during our study period led to divisive public opinions on immigration and, consequently, the creation of specific draft policies and political stances affecting immigrant communities. NPOs may find reaching out, by calling attention to policymakers, to be necessary to serve immigrant communities. However, according to our participants, NPOs' tax exempt statuses limit their capabilities to confront political actors when public policies affect their communities.

These in-depth discussions about issues and politics among NPOs, political stakeholders, community members, and other interested parties may serve as a form of *crowdsourced policymaking* [1]. In prior work, crowdsourcing policymaking is shown to enable governments to access people's needs efficiently [12,45] and encourage exchange of deliberative arguments and reasoning [2]. To support such crowdsourced policymaking process on social media, an engaging, trustworthy environment must be provided [15]. NPOs' must be able to reinforce their role in addressing social issues, without endangering their tax-exempt status, on the social media platforms they use. One solution may be to highlight NPOs' role as moderators in policymaker-community interaction. When pressing issues arise, NPOs could provide a venue integrated within social media (*e.g.*, in forms of webinar, polling, or focus groups) for policymakers and community members to communicate and voice opinions. By harnessing NPOs' existing networks on social media for crowdsourced policymaking, they would be able to direct community's voices to policymakers, without over-engaging with political issues.

While we see the opportunities to improve communication effectiveness for NPOs on social media, we caution that there could be unexpected consequences of such mechanism. Displaying NPO's impact on civic engagement and policymaking may be seen by NPOs as surveillance over their political engagement, and causes concerns about using social media in general. Thus, designing for NPOs requires designers and technological practitioners to consider how to ensure data privacy, and the possibility to remove historical data once it becomes outdated.

## Study Limitations

Because our sampled NPOs' frequency of use varies to a large extent, the majority of our dataset come from ones that are very active online. Our results may aggregate such types of NPOs and not reveal the true use of social media of smaller ones.

We leveraged existing algorithms, LIWC, as tools to help us understand the nature of the dataset. Although such tools have been used in a variety of studies [17,22], we acknowledged that there might be biases in the design of algorithms, which could essentially affect the validity of our study [19].

Using the dataset, we studied the correlations between NPOs followers and other social media usage attributes, e.g. portion of call-to-actions. However, the small sample size (36 NPOs) may limit the study's statistical power.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, immigrant-focused NPOs' social media use was examined through quantitative analysis, linguistic analysis, and open coding. Combined with interviews of participants who manage such social media accounts, this study shows how immigrant- focused NPOs use social media in a political climate what is hostile to their communities, through three key strategies: 1) *disseminating content about immigration-related issues and policies*; 2) *calling for participation in collective endeavors to influence the political climate*; 3) *engaging in conversations with outside stakeholders including political actors, media, and other organizations*. Using community empowerment theory as a theoretical framework, we show that social media becomes a venue where NPOs work toward empowering their communities through disseminating information, calling for civic participation, and drawing attention from outside agents. We, then, provide design recommendations for social media to help NPOs manage

stakeholder complexity, understand community engagement, and connect policymakers with community members on this type of platform.

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