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# Facebook as a tool for supporting dialogic accounting? Evidence from large philanthropic foundations in the United States

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore the utilization of the social network, Facebook, as an instrument of stakeholder engagement and dialogic accounting in American charitable foundations, specifically non-profit organizations that are dedicated to philanthropy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research motivation involves whether online interaction through Facebook could represent a channel of dialogic accounting that engages organizational stakeholders. This paper aims to understand if this dialogue is geared to generate a consensus necessary to deliberate over decisions that are shared between all stakeholders, or if a divergent and agonistic perspective, which highlights struggles and differences between actors, prevails. The present study employs a form of content analysis that takes into account the Facebook pages of the 100 largest American philanthropic foundations.

**Findings** – The primary goal of the analysis is to examine the discrepancies in terms of how (and how much) large organizations are using Facebook. The study wants to provide more details on which kind of information large organizations are willing to disclose and collect on Facebook, and to evaluate the level and type of interaction between foundations and users.

**Research limitations/implications** – Further research could build on the present study by providing in-depth case studies and extending the analysis to other social media and other types of organizations.

**Originality/value** – Social media represent a powerful mechanism to engage stakeholders in a polylogic conversation. However, the scholarly literature confirms that further studies are necessary to understand how companies and organization can exploit this potential.

**Keywords** Facebook, Social media, Stakeholder engagement, Dialogic accounting, Foundations, Polylogic accounting

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

According to the extant literature, by 2005 and 2006 strategies related to the internet had shifted from a primary focus on information to a focus on communication and cooperation (Fuchs, 2008). This transformation is often designated as the emergence of “Internet 2.0” or “Web 2.0.” The advent of Web 2.0 not only reorganized the way in which organizations collected information, but it also redefined stakeholders’ expectations. Social media applications, for instance, are creating new opportunities for innovation and improved transparency (Meijer and Thaens, 2010; Bonsón and Ratkai, 2013). These new tools of dialogic communication have changed how organizations connect with their stakeholders by allowing them to receive real-time feedback about organizational announcements and engage in conversations (Chua *et al.*, 2012; Manetti *et al.*, 2016).

Online social media can be defined as “a group of Internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). It is an

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umbrella term describing different types of applications, such as collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), blogs/micro-blogs (e.g. Twitter), content communities (e.g. YouTube), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life) (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2012). Social media applications are particularly well-suited for stakeholder engagement (SE), as the community element embedded within them makes it possible to interact with a large group of people, especially external stakeholders such as local communities, beneficiaries, other non-profit organizations (NPOs), and central and local public administrations.

Social media can help organizations conduct SE because it allows one party (the organization) to interact with another (the stakeholder) in a two-way dialogue in which both parties learn from these interactions, thereby deeply revising their expectations and preconceptions (Manetti, 2011; Owen *et al.*, 2001). SE, in fact, is a powerful tool of dialogic communication (Bebbington, Brown and Frame, 2007; Brown, 2009; Brown and Dillard, 2013b), offering interactive mutual learning processes that are capable of promoting transformative action and social change (Bebbington, Brown and Frame, 2007, p. 357).

In light of the crucial role increasingly played by online interaction in conducting SE (Kent *et al.*, 2003; Park and Reber, 2008; Porter, 2001; Rybako and Seltzer, 2010; Unerman and Bennett, 2004), we will explore the utilization of social media – with special emphasis on Facebook – as an instrument for supporting dialogic accounting in philanthropic foundations and identifying, dialoguing with, and engaging the largest possible number of organization stakeholders (Swift *et al.*, 2001; Lovejoy *et al.*, 2012). We study the role played by Facebook in promoting debate (Unerman and Bennett, 2004) on a diverse array of topics (e.g. grant-making policies, program funding, and social responsibility issues) in order to better define the relationship between foundations and their stakeholders. This kind of online debate and interaction can potentially engage stakeholders in a two-way conversation that can produce reliable SE, which is a necessary feature for accounting and reporting relevant information according to the expectations of stakeholders, especially insofar as external forms of non-financial accountability are concerned.

A dialogic system extends beyond notions of communication and refers to iterative mutual learning processes that are designed to promote transformative action. According to Brown (2009), dialogic processes inform accountability relationships between stakeholders and organizations (Gray *et al.*, 1997). This is why previous studies on accountability systems have focused on enhancing the levels of interaction (Medawar, 1976; Morgan, 1988; Dey, 2003; Gray, 1997; Boyce, 2000; Gray and Bebbington, 2001; Brown, 2009) and, most recently, on attempts to create new dialogic accounting practices and technologies that are able to promote SE and interaction at every level (Bebbington, Brown and Frame, 2007; Bebbington, Brown, Frame and Thomson, 2007; Frame and Brown, 2008; Thomson and Bebbington, 2005). Thomson and Bebbington (2005) claim that SE should address conflicts among stakeholders, recognize diverse viewpoints, and explicitly manage power dynamics. They maintain that monologic accounting should be replaced by an approach that balances the different perspectives and expectations of the community (Gray *et al.*, 1997).

Recent literature, especially among scholars who have adopted a more critical perspective on these matters, have tried to foster accounting practices that are more receptive to the needs of a “multi-voiced” plural society (Brown and Dillard, 2013a, b), taking into account the diverse array of stakeholder values and interests (Brown, 2009). These practices have been included in the umbrella expression “dialogic accounting,” which tries to recognize multiple points of views and refuses to privilege capital markets and investors as “priority” stakeholders. Dialogic accounting rejects the idea of a universal narrative, preferring to think of institutions as being exposed to diverse perspectives and interests from its various stakeholders. As a result, accounting is viewed as having the potential to stimulate interaction, rather than as a set of techniques that can maximize value creation and “construct governable others” (Miller and O’Leary, 1987).

Although it is not considered a proper accounting tool, social media has the potential to support dialogic accounting systems by providing valuable information on what stakeholders expect of each organization in terms of quantitative or qualitative (narrative) information processing. This is especially true among NPOs, where collection forms, processing, and reporting of data, be it financial or socio-environmental nature, are not required by law, and in the case of philanthropic foundations where stakeholders pay serious attention to grant-giving policies and to transparency in the use of financial resources. Thus, we believe that social media are powerful mechanisms for reaching and keeping in touch with a large number of stakeholders, thereby guaranteeing an interactive dialogue with them at very low costs. We hope to fill the gap in the literature on this topic by employing in our study theories on dialogic accounting, which have been discussed by many authors in the last decade (see e.g. Dillard and Ruchala, 2005; Bebbington, Brown and Frame, 2007; Brown, 2009; Brown and Dillard, 2013a, b).

Our main research motivation is determining whether the utilization of Facebook (one of the most popular social media applications worldwide) represents an effective SE mechanism among philanthropic foundations in terms of supporting a system of dialogic accounting. We also try to determine if Facebook is used to make important decisions and keep in touch with the community, or rather whether it is just another instrument of legitimization. In the process of exploring this research topic we will study:

- the main characteristics of the 100 largest American Philanthropic Foundations by Total Giving (hereafter referred to as Top 100 USF) as third sector actors, and their specific contribution to the modernization of society through the promotion of multiple types of “social” programs and stimulating diffuse forms of citizen engagement;
- the role of social media in supporting a system of authentic dialogic accounting among NPOs in which multiple-stakeholder theory prevails and notions of accountability transcend mere economic ends; and
- the types of interactions these foundations foster with their stakeholders and the main topics discussed.

Examining these areas of study will allow us to assess the contribution of Facebook to SE in these foundations, while also explaining how they might support a system of dialogic accounting.

## 2. US Philanthropic foundations

Philanthropic foundations started their activities in the USA at the beginning of the twentieth century with the creation of the Rockefeller Institute of Medical Research and the Carnegie Institution of Washington in 1901, the General Education Board in 1902, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1905, the Russell Sage Foundation in 1907, the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission in 1909, the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 1911, and the Rockefeller Foundation in 1913.

All of these institutions were characterized by an innovative form of giving and philanthropy: rich industrialists decided to devote a considerable part of their personal wealth and assets to social and philanthropic purposes. Many other foundations followed suit in later years, engaging in philanthropic activities in numerous countries.

Philanthropic foundations, which are largely independent of the state, represent a particular source of support for public initiatives that mediates between the state and the citizens (Bulmer, 1995, p. 276). Foundation aims are usually expressed in general terms relating to the advancement of knowledge and the improvement of human welfare. They are

part of a broader process involving the erosion of personal relationships as the basis of social cohesion, wealth creation, the welfare system, and the quality of life of a specific country or region (Bulmer, 1995).

During the twentieth century, US charitable foundations have helped modernize society promoting health, sustainable agriculture, arts, science, and education-grant programs (Gordon, 1997). In the present “global civil society” (Chandler, 2004; Keane, 2003; Lipschutz, 2005) charitable foundations are focusing on embedding diffuse forms of civil-society engagement, contributing to new configurations of wealth redistribution, and encouraging new forms of citizen engagement (Vogel, 2006).

In 2013 USA overall giving among philanthropic foundations reached \$54.7 billion. According to the Foundation Center’s annual “Foundation Giving Forecast Survey” (Foundation Center, 2013) it will continue to grow in 2014.

In 2012 \$316.2 billion worth of private giving in the USA came from private or community foundations.

Foundations can independently determine the beneficiaries, as well as the amount and the terms of their grant-making activities. Although they address multiple issues around the globe, in 2012 they were especially focused on health (22 percent of total amount of giving), education (22 percent), human services (16 percent), public affairs/society benefit (16 percent), and arts and culture (10 percent).

Some foundations believe that a small number of very large, targeted grants are more likely to be most effective in achieving their goals, while others emphasize providing smaller, unrestricted grants to a variety of organizations or individuals (the median level of funding in 2012 was \$30,000) (Foundation Center, 2013). Similarly, some grant-makers focus their giving on specific populations, such as the economically disadvantaged, while others believe that better results will be achieved by targeting larger swaths of the population.

A vast majority of US foundations focus their giving on the communities in which they are located; some also focus their grant-making at the regional or national level. At the same time, a number of the nation’s largest foundations – as well as a few smaller foundations, especially those that are founded by young people with an international view of philanthropic activities – engage in international grant-making, whether directly to organizations in other countries or through support for international programs conducted by organizations based in the USA.

US philanthropic foundations should be classified as NPOs since, according to the well-known structural-operational definition elaborated by Salamon and Anheier (1997), they hold the following basic requirements:

- the presence of some structure and regulation to their operations, whether or not they are formally constituted or legally registered (organizations);
- they are not part of the apparatus of the state (private nature);
- they are not primarily commercial in purpose and do not distribute profits to a set of directors, stockholders, or managers (non-distribution constraint);
- they have their own mechanisms for internal governance, are able to cease operations on their own authority, and are fundamentally in control of their own affairs (self-governing); and
- membership or participation in them is not legally required or otherwise compulsory (voluntary participation and work).

Using these strictures as a guide, we attempt to describe the role of social media in supporting dialogic accounting systems in such foundations through continuous interaction and engagement with their stakeholders.

### 3. Theoretical framework

The scholarly literature on the third sector suggests that where there are no special relationships with specific categories of stakeholders, pressures on accountability systems are more intense due to several reasons:

- (1) The absence of shareholders in the traditional sense makes stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) a viable perspective from which to understand accountability among multiple stakeholders, especially when power differentials in capital and factor markets and regulation methods result in competing interests that need to be implicitly or explicitly prioritized (Collier, 2008, p. 935; Mulgan, 2000, p. 124).
- (2) In the third and quasi-public sector, organizations need to ensure their survival and success in the long term by directly satisfying all stakeholders (Collier, 2008; Woodward and Marshall, 2004, p. 124; Costa, Ramus and Andreaus, 2011). Since institutional aims are at the basis of accountability systems, multiple-stakeholder theory is more relevant to this field (Collier, 2008; Manetti and Toccafondi, 2014, p. 39).
- (3) When profits are not a focus, accountability is able to move beyond mere economic goals (Dawson and Dunn, 2006). In traditional theories of organizational control, contract fairness is guaranteed through market efficiency, but social and moral responsibility extends beyond what is assigned to formal contracts (Antonacopoulou and Meric, 2005). Stakeholder theory offers organizations, especially NPOs, a way of identifying and reconciling disparate stakeholder interests by recognizing organizational obligations to wider and more ethically concerned constituencies (Simmons, 2004).

According to stakeholder theory, SE is important among NPOs because it tries to engage primary stakeholders in decision-making processes, thereby making them participants in organization management, sharing information, dialoguing, and creating a model of mutual responsibility. SE, in fact, “creates a dynamic context of interaction, mutual respect, dialogue and change, not a unilateral management of stakeholders” (Andriof *et al.*, 2002, p. 9). As a result, the main feature of SE is not the extent to which it encourages the involvement of stakeholders as a means of mitigating or managing their expectations, but rather its value in creating a network of mutual responsibility (Andriof *et al.*, 2002, p. 15; Unerman and Bennett, 2004; Voss *et al.*, 2005; Windsor, 2002, p. 138).

A close link between SE and accountability systems exists among NPOs not only because the former is at the very core of latter, but because accountability itself is a dialogic process that examines relationships between stakeholders and organizations (Gray *et al.*, 1997).

According to Brown (2009), Brown and Dillard (2013a), and Dillard and Yuthas (2013), many social responsibility tools have been proposed over the years as a means of promoting multiple-way interaction (Medawar, 1976; Morgan, 1988; Dey, 2003; Gray, 1997; Boyce, 2000; Gray and Bebbington, 2001). In the last decade alone, attempts have been made to promote dialogic accounting technologies and forms of engagement (Bebbington, Brown and Frame, 2007; Bebbington, Brown, Frame and Thomson, 2007; Frame and Brown, 2008; Thomson and Bebbington, 2005) that use online social media. However, the practical results have often been unsatisfactory, and not enough progress has been made in terms of the ability to engage multiple perspectives and take into account marginalized voices (Bebbington, Brown and Frame, 2007; Gray *et al.*, 1997; O’Dwyer, 2005).

SE is conducted in order to attain:

- (1) a deliberative, general consensus (Laughlin, 1987, 2007) based on Habermas’ “ideal speech situation” – communication among stakeholders in undistorted conditions (Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1989) that can be built in a “public sphere,” “a discursive

arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement and action” (Villa, 1992, p. 712; Dahlberg, 2005) – that addresses what information and data should be disclosed in the report. When applied to the corporate arena, the result of “an open, honest and unbiased ideal speech situation debate among all stakeholders should therefore lead to the acceptance by all stakeholders of a democratically determined consensus view of corporate responsibilities” (Unerman and Bennett, 2004, p. 691).

- (2) a collection of divergent socio-political views in an agonistic perspective, highlighting the unavoidable values and assumptions associated with different accounts and recognizing the need for multiple engagements between different actors across various political spaces (Gray, 2002; O’Dwyer, 2005; Brown and Dillard, 2013a, b). This perspective (Gray, 2002; O’Dwyer, 2005) is based on an agonistic model of participation (Brown, 2009; Dillard and Roslender, 2011; Dillard and Brown, 2012; Brown and Dillard, 2013a, b).

According to the deliberative approach, SE is necessary for defining a general consensus among diverse stakeholders. Proponents of the agonistic approach, meanwhile, suggest that SE helps synthesize the different points of views found among diverse groups of interest.

SE plays a fundamental role in every dialogic accounting process because it represents the necessary premise for allowing a more pluralist expression of public interest, thus “mitigating the dominance of instrumental rationality” (Dillard and Ruchala, 2005, p. 621). Studies by Brown (2009, pp. 324-328) and Brown and Dillard (2013a, b) suggest that recognizing a diversity of ideological orientations, enabling access for non-experts, ensuring effective participation, and being attentive to power relations are core principles of dialogic accounting. Monologic accounting, conversely, is structured in such a way as to ensure that the information needs of investors affect the values and principles of accounting and reporting systems. In satisfying these needs, monologic accounting is assumed to serve everyone, regardless of their political viewpoints. Alternative perspectives are not taken into the account because they can “distract” from the main objective of monologic accounting: to provide current or potential investors with expected information. As Brown (2009, p. 316) argues, “monologic accounting also reflects a finality orientation; the ‘facts speaking for themselves.’” From a dialogic perspective, social media interaction can help develop accounting and reporting models that are based on a multi-dimensional, participative approach and are sensitive to power differentials in society (Bebbington, Brown and Frame, 2007; Bebbington, Brown, Frame and Thomson, 2007; Frame and Brown, 2008; O’Dwyer, 2005). Thomson and Bebbington (2005), for example, call for the unitary approach associated with monologic accounting to be replaced by a polyvocal citizenship perspective (Gray *et al.*, 1997), while also encouraging a brand of social and environmental accounting that takes SE seriously, recognizes conflicts among stakeholders, engages multiple viewpoints, and explicitly addresses power dynamics. For instance, other studies (Manetti and Bellucci, 2016) suggest that Facebook is used quite often for interacting with the community on CSR topics, but rarely for defining the contents of social or environmental reports. The type of interaction observed by the authors is more oriented toward gathering divergent socio-political views in an agonistic perspective (Brown and Dillard, 2013a, b) than to adopting a deliberative approach aimed at forging a general consensus on how to address specific economic, social, or environmental issues (Unerman and Bennett, 2004, p. 691). The authors also found that many organizations tend to use social media for legitimizing their presence in society (Deegan, 2006), but that the interaction that arises from through these tools is often associated with agonistic accounting. Facebook appears to be utilized as a means of synthesizing the different points of views found among diverse groups of interest and recognizing elements of difference, antagonism, and divergent socio-political orientations within the community of online users. The level of interaction between the organization and its stakeholders on these

topics is not particularly high and communication, after an initial push toward a two-way conversation, assumes unidirectional tones because organizations tend not to respond to the comments or provocations of Facebook users. The main risk of using social media to produce SE in social and environmental reporting, then, is giving the illusion that stakeholders can make a difference, even though in reality they do not often influence policies (Manetti and Bellucci, 2016; Manetti *et al.*, 2016).

Specific studies on the role of social media in supporting dialogic accounting systems in the non-profit sector do not exist at the moment. However, other forms of research support the idea that social media are excellent tools for enhancing dialogic communication in non-profit contexts, which means that there is a growing concern in identifying motivations for using social media by these types of organizations (Auger, 2013). Recent studies have examined factors such as network activity (Bortree and Seltzer, 2009), social media experience (Zorn *et al.*, 2013), organization age and size (Nah and Saxton, 2013), and internationalization level (Galvez-Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012).

Earlier studies found that NPOs were not using Facebook to its full potential in terms of fostering user involvement in organizational activities (Waters *et al.*, 2009, p. 106). One-way forms of communication were prevalent on both the Facebook and Twitter pages of various NPOs (Bortree and Seltzer, 2009; Lovejoy *et al.*, 2012; Xifra and Grau, 2010). However, Briones *et al.* (2011) discovered that the American Red Cross encouraged two-way dialogue on their social media pages, especially when it came to developing relationships with young volunteers, members of the organization, the local community, and the media. According to Auger (2013), non-profit advocacy organizations, though they often adopt one-way communication strategies to persuade people to accept their points of view, are using Facebook to solicit feedback and encourage other types of two-way communication.

Nah and Saxton (2013) found that external factors, such as stakeholder pressure, play important roles in predicting the use of social media among NPOs (see also Corder, 2001; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Zorn *et al.*, 2011). The authors found that NPOs that focus on obtaining revenues from market-based program-delivery rather than grants or donations tend to rely more on social media to facilitate communications with their customers or users. Furthermore, fundraising was negatively related to how frequently the organizations actually used social media in terms of both message volume and engaging in dialogue (see also Zorn *et al.*, 2013).

Obar *et al.* (2012) found that NPOs tend to use social media on a daily basis to facilitate civic engagement and involve stakeholders in collective actions. Ammann (2010) similarly underlines the relevance of social media for political and advocacy initiatives. According to Nah and Saxton (2013), social media use among NPOs seems to depend on available resources and capacities (especially web capabilities), even though the scope of an organization's assets does not necessarily represent a barrier to the use of social media (see also Nah, 2010; Yeon *et al.*, 2007). On the contrary, Saxton and Guo (2011) found that asset size and board performance among advocacy NPOs are the most significant factors associated with the adoption of web-based accountability practices among these types of organizations.

Despite their potential value as an interaction tool, social media can also be used by NPOs as a mechanism of legitimization (Bonsón and Ratkai, 2013) rather than as a means of encouraging authentic dialogue and cooperation (Manetti and Bellucci, 2016). Legitimacy theory suggests that a social contract exists between an organization and society (Deegan, 2006; Deegan and Samkin, 2009; Suchman, 1995). This means that an organization can conduct its activities in a manner that is both socially acceptable and does not necessarily follow stakeholders' expectations. Thus, organizations can voluntarily report and communicate over social media according to the expectations of society (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Social media, in fact, do not necessarily provide people with an effective say in the decision-making process, as transformative institutionalized power is



rarely extended to the general public (Fuchs, 2008). As a result, using social media for SE can sometimes create the illusion that stakeholders can make a difference on an organization, when in fact their influence on policies is minimal (if not non-existent). This is especially true in the non-profit sector, where a respectable social image is seen as being a fundamental part of attracting human and financial resources.

Scholars who adopt a legitimacy perspective suggest that organizations use these instruments of external accountability to influence (or even manipulate) stakeholder perceptions (Patten and Guidry, 2010; Coupland, 2007; Deegan, 2002), reduce their external costs, or diminish pressures being imposed by society or regulators (Tate *et al.*, 2010; Caron and Turcotte, 2009; Ballou *et al.*, 2006; Adams, 2002). Voluntary information is disclosed for strategic reasons rather than on the basis of any perceived responsibilities. Gray *et al.* (1995) claim that some organizations have incentives to improve their disclosures, although this does not always positively correlate with their sustainability performance (Patten, 1992).

Voluntary disclosure through social media can enhance an organization's legitimacy, elevating its image and perception among various members of society and external stakeholders, especially when using external accountability systems (Clarkson *et al.*, 2011). This has led scholars to question whether social media is used by entities for legitimizing their presence within society and changing their reputation among stakeholders, or rather for creating a system of dialogic – although not necessarily convergent – debate on social, environmental, or financial issues.

The main motivation of this study is, therefore, to add to the literature on NPOs by studying whether social media, especially Facebook, can act as reliable instruments of SE in philanthropic foundations that are capable of gathering valuable information for orienting strategies and practices, or whether they are just another tool for achieving legitimization. We believe that the literature is lacking in terms of assessing the role social media plays among NPOs in fostering an effective brand of two-way conversation with stakeholders, as well as encouraging dialogue and interaction with the public that moves beyond the top-down, one-sided strategies of the past. We also want to contribute to the debates on dialogic accounting by examining the role of Facebook in defining relevant information that can be included in accounting and reporting practices among NPOs.

#### 4. Methodology

Our main research motivation is determining whether online interaction through Facebook represents an effective SE mechanism in various philanthropic foundations. We also try to determine whether the use of Facebook represents a system of dialogic accounting and interaction that contributes to the decision-making process and allows organizations to keep in touch with the community, or if it is just another instrument of legitimization. We also want to figure out whether philanthropic foundations employ Facebook as a sort of “public arena” that recognizes diverse ideas and points of view in an agonistic perspective, which in turn can have an impact on various management issues.

Facebook is an online social networking service that was launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg with some of his college classmates at the Harvard University. The founders had initially limited the website's membership to Harvard students, but later expanded it to colleges in the Boston area, the Ivy League, and the Stanford University. Since 2006, anyone who is at least 13 years old is allowed to become a registered user of the website, although the age requirement may be higher depending on applicable local laws. After registering to use the site, users can create a profile, add other users as “friends,” exchange messages, post status updates and photos, share videos, and receive notifications when other friends update their profiles, thereby creating a virtual social network. Additionally, users may join common-interest user groups, organized by workplace, school, community, or other characteristics, and categorize their friends into lists such as “family,” “colleagues,”

or “close friends.” Facebook had over 1.3 billion monthly active users – which includes both individuals and organizations – as of June 2014 (Facebook, 2014), many of whom use this platform for communicating, interacting, and engaging with other users.

Dialogic approaches to social media and networks can be criticized due to the practical difficulties in creating the appropriate conditions for success (Power and Laughlin, 1996). Even the most significant difficulties and obstacles associated with dialogic accounting, such as the impracticability of all stakeholders taking part in a dialogue (Power and Laughlin, 1996) or the difficulty of balancing divergent stakeholder expectations, can be alleviated, if not solved, using social media. Indeed, social media might lead to the improvement of accountability systems, providing them with the opportunity to significantly change the behavior of both organizations and stakeholders (Unerman and Bennett, 2004).

In order to explore our main research motivation, we designed a content analysis that took into account the Facebook page of the 100 biggest US philanthropic foundations by total giving. We relied on a database made available by the Foundation Center, which is one of the most well-known philanthropic research centers in the world. The list of foundations is shown in Table I.

The database lists the 100 largest grant-making foundations in the USA, ranked by total giving and based on the audited financial data in the Foundation Center’s database as of September 2014 (Foundation Center, 2014). The data on total giving includes grants, scholarships, employee matching gifts, and other amounts reported as “grants and contributions paid during the year” on the 990-PF tax form; total giving does not include all qualifying distributions under the tax law, such as loans, program-related investments, and program or other administrative expenses (Foundation Center, 2014).

Our aim was to obtain descriptive empirical evidence on the use of social media by the 100 largest grant-making foundations in the USA, adopting an approach that is similar to the methods used by Brainard and Edlins (2015) in their study of police departments. In an era in which public and private organizations and agencies are increasing the use of social media to engage and collaborate with citizens and stakeholders, we want to understand whether the necessary conditions for such a collaboration via social media exist in the first place. We therefore conducted a descriptive analysis of the posts and tweets on the social media sites of several philanthropic foundations in order to study:

- whether or not philanthropic foundations use their social media accounts;
- whether or not interaction between organizations and their stakeholders and/or among stakeholders actually happens;
- in cases where interaction or dialogue is found, whether it is dialogic/collaborative or oppositional/agonistic; and
- how conversation on social media ends and the role of philanthropic foundations in ending online dialogue.

Our research team is composed of three junior researchers and is coordinated by two senior academic researchers who designed and supervised the entire study. Our analysis is composed of three steps. The first step assesses how many of the Top 100 USF have an official Facebook page. In order to do so, our team manually searched for the official website and/or performed a direct search on Facebook.

The second step of our analysis studies the types of interaction that were initiated in a specific period of time between the organization and its stakeholders on Facebook, using both social media analytics and content analysis. Social media analytics is the practice of gathering and analyzing data from blogs and social media websites to make business decisions; it involves measuring, analyzing, and interpreting interactions and associations between people, topics, and ideas (Stieglitz *et al.*, 2014; Bekmamedova *et al.*, 2014;

ID	Foundation name (state)	Total giving (\$) (most current audited financial data in the Foundation Center's database as of September 13, 2014)	No. of FB page likes	No. of post (between September 1 and November 15, 2014)	Average no. of comments on a single post	Average no. of likes on a single post	Average no. of shares for a single post	Commitment score	Popularity score	Virality score
1	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (WA)	3,178,235,962	939,895	30	83.46	1320.83	182.23	0.09	1.41	0.19
2	The Abbvie Patient Assistance Foundation (IL)	783,366,952								
3	Lilly Cares Foundation, Inc. (NJ)	697,004,928								
4	Merck Patient Assistance Program, Inc. (NJ)	665,582,721	17,370	30	37.03	5.13	3.70	0.00	0.00	0.00
5	Genentech Access To Care Foundation (CA)	611,680,261								
6	Johnson & Johnson Patient Assistance Foundation, Inc. (NJ)	599,953,667								
7	GlaxoSmithKline Patient Access Programs Foundation (PA)	593,753,416								
8	Ford Foundation (NY)	548,857,548	13,743	20	1.40	11.00	1.05	0.10	0.80	0.08
9	The Bristol-Myers Squibb Patient Assistance Foundation, Inc. (NY)	520,507,909								
10	Pfizer Patient Assistance Foundation, Inc. (NY)	515,726,553								
11	Open Society Institute (NY)	455,863,798	85,143	30	0.93	43.76	10.26	0.01	0.51	0.12
12	Novartis Patient Assistance Foundation, Inc. (NJ)	452,745,445	81,904	30	72.43	7.37	1.20	0.00	0.00	0.00
13	Walton Family Foundation, Inc. (AR)	423,776,585	2,782	30	0.43	9.83	0.40	0.16	3.53	0.14
14	The Estee Lauder Fund (IL)	396,802,000								
15	The Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation (NE)	367,167,893								
16	Silicon Valley Community Foundation (CA)	362,390,000	5,857	30	0.26	10.03	1.03	0.05	1.71	0.18
17	The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (NJ)	292,906,381	22,415	30	1.16	35.06	16.06	0.05	1.56	0.72
18	Sanofi Foundation for North America (NJ)	284,044,399								

*(continued)*

**Table I.**  
List of largest US philanthropic foundations by total giving and Facebook data

Table I.

ID	Foundation name (state)	Total giving (\$) (most current audited financial data in the Foundation Center's database as of September 13, 2014)	No. of FB page likes	No. of post (between September 1 and November 15, 2014)	Average no. of comments on a single post	Average no. of likes on a single post	Average no. of shares for a single post	Commitment score	Popularity score	Virality score
19	Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation (CA)	270,300,000								
20	Lilly Endowment Inc. (IN)	259,898,647								
21	W.K.Kellogg Foundation (MI)	258,106,354	3,830	14	1.42	18.42	3.57	0.37	4.81	0.93
22	Foundation to Promote Open Society	257,940,437								
23	The David and Lucile Packard Foundation (CA)	256,130,462	350	16	0.75	6.81	1.00	2.14	19.46	2.86
24	International Medical Outreach, Inc. (TX)	247,416,601								
25	The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (CA)	240,100,000	3,079	5	6.80	31.40	6.80	2.21	10.20	2.21
26	The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (NY)	233,047,309								
27	Greater Kansas City Community Foundation (MO)	226,808,114	1,007	12	0.33	4.16	0.50	0.33	4.14	0.50
28	The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust (NY)	210,352,475								
29	The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (IL)	209,859,152								
30	Wells Fargo Foundation	186,775,875								
31	The WalMart Foundation, Inc. (AR)	185,556,996	34,886,002	30	1,050.57	45.70	73.03	0.00	0.00	0.00
32	Boehringer Ingelheim Cares Foundation, Inc. (CT)	182,859,236								
33	The Simons Foundation (NY)	179,977,010								
34	The Bank of America Charitable Foundation, Inc. (NC)	175,299,789	2,044,641	30	8,355.40	872.37	146.23	0.00	0.00	0.00
35	The Chicago Community Trust (IL)	169,744,869	2,932	30	0.33	3.83	0.73	0.11	1.31	0.25
36	California Community Foundation (CA)	164,428,000	3,271	30	0.40	10.30	1.70	0.12	3.15	0.52
37	Foundation For The Carolinas (NC)	157,713,177	1,390	18	0.66	15.94	1.22	0.48	11.47	0.88

(continued)

ID	Foundation name (state)	Total giving (\$) (most current audited financial data in the Foundation Center's database as of September 13, 2014)	No. of FB page likes	No. of post (between September 1 and November 15, 2014)	Average no. of comments on a single post	Average no. of likes on a single post	Average no. of shares for a single post	Commitment score	Popularity score	Virality score
38	Robert W. Woodruff Foundation, Inc. (GA)	155,816,887								
39	Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation (CA)	153,400,126								
40	The New York Community Trust (NY)	144,241,100	812	30	0.13	3.26	0.23	0.16	4.02	0.29
41	The Kresge Foundation (MI)	141,959,580	2,491	30	0.20	10.23	1.47	0.08	4.11	0.59
42	Camp Foundation (CA)	135,600,000								
43	The Rockefeller Foundation (NY)	135,082,747	42,345	30	1.57	36.27	0.77	0.04	0.86	0.02
44	Bloomberg Philanthropies (NY)	131,263,386	115,813	30	7.77	1,565.10	26.83	0.07	13.51	0.23
45	GE Foundation (CT)	130,695,809								
46	The Duke Endowment (NC)	127,729,045	857	13	0.31	5.85	0.62	0.36	6.82	0.72
47	The Dolesse Foundation (OK)	118,056,788								
48	The California Endowment (CA)	115,768,774	30,550	23	14.87	564.91	372.48			
49	The JP Morgan Chase Foundation (NY)	115,516,001	2,706,530	26	36.00	2,380.04	184.42	0.49	18.49	12.19
50	Carnegie Corporation of New York (NY)	113,006,380	180,826	27	0.37	12.37	1.11	0.01	0.88	0.07
51	Tulsa Community Foundation (OK)	110,512,000	1,311	19	0.00	4.47	2.11	0.00	0.07	0.01
52	John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (FL)	107,825,135	23,329	18	0.89	19.89	4.56	0.00	3.41	1.61
53	Boston Foundation, Inc. (MA)	105,365,000	2,049	26	0.31	6.15	0.65	0.04	0.85	0.20
54	John Templeton Foundation (PA)	105,248,596	2,095	24	0.17	5.83	0.58	0.15	3.00	0.32
55	Annenberg Foundation (CA)	104,790,232	2,037	29	1.10	26.41	0.76	0.08	2.78	0.28
56	Robertson Foundation (NY)	103,711,212	31	3	0.00	2.00	0.00	0.54	12.97	0.37
57	McCune Foundation (PA)	102,414,440						0.00	64.52	0.00
58	Greater Houston Community Foundation (TX)	98,934,435						0.00	0.00	0.00
59	The Annie E. Casey Foundation (MD)	98,681,016	5,028	20	0.20	9.15	6.10	0.04	1.82	1.21
60	The Columbus Foundation and Affiliated Organizations (OH)	95,963,350	6,054	29	2.07	83.59	2.21	0.34	13.81	0.36

*(continued)*Dialogic  
accounting

Table I.

ID	Foundation name (state)	Total giving (\$) (most current audited financial data in the Foundation Center's database as of September 13, 2014)	No. of FB page likes	No. of post (between September 1 and November 15, 2014)	Average no. of comments on a single post	Average no. of likes on a single post	Average no. of shares for a single post	Commitment score	Popularity score	Virality score
61	The Harry and Jeannette Weinberg Foundation, Inc. (MD)	95,928,547	848	25	0.76	14.04	0.28	0.90	16.56	0.33
62	The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region (DC)	95,397,756	697	1	5.00	0.00	0.00	7.17	0.00	0.00
63	Citi Foundation (NY)	88,898,161	742,847	25	75.88	25,263.80	162.60	0.10	34.01	0.22
64	Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (MD)	87,641,301	5,049	13	2.54	1749.31	6.15	0.50	346.47	1.22
65	The San Francisco Foundation (CA)	86,830,000	2,415	26	0.31	8.92	0.38	0.13	3.69	0.16
66	The McKnight Foundation (MN)	85,114,992	1,602	30	0.13	5.57	0.27	0.08	3.47	0.17
67	Richard King Mellon Foundation (PA)	84,211,046								
68	Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (CA)	83,243,022	4,194	19	0.53	45.05	1.11	0.13	10.74	0.26
69	The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta (GA)	83,044,000	2,726	1	0.00	5.00	1.0	0.00	1.83	0.37
70	Communities Foundation of Texas, Inc. (TX)	82,493,000	1,295	21	0.57	15.29	0.86	0.00	11.80	0.00
71	The Michael and Susan Dell Foundation (TX)	80,821,766	2,731	28	0.18	5.36	0.50	0.07	1.96	0.18
72	The William Penn Foundation (PA)	79,675,000								
73	The Cleveland Foundation (OH)	79,643,582	6,702	30	3.50	41.00	8.93	0.52	6.12	1.33
74	Houston Endowment Inc. (TX)	78,718,050								
75	Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (NY)	77,659,983								
76	The Saint Paul Foundation (MN)	77,615,019	949	23	0.35	7.70	0.35	0.37	8.11	0.37
77	Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (NY)	76,720,974								
78	Omaha Community Foundation (NE)	75,638,463	3,721	19	1.11	19.79	0.68	0.30	5.32	0.18
79	The Starr Foundation (NY)	73,536,203								
80	ExxonMobil Foundation (TX)	72,747,966								
81	Abbott Fund (IL)	72,741,720								
82	The James Irvine Foundation (CA)	72,718,888	1,480	30	0.23	9.03	1.33	0.16	6.10	0.90
83	Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee, Inc. (TN)	72,705,671	7,567	22	0.36	18.86	4.05	0.05	2.49	0.53

(continued)

ID	Foundation name (state)	Total giving (\$) (most current audited financial data in the Foundation Center's database as of September 13, 2014)	No. of FB page likes	No. of post (between September 1 and November 15, 2014)	Average no. of comments on a single post	Average no. of likes on a single post	Average no. of shares for a single post	Commitment score	Popularity score	Virality score
84	The Coca-Cola Foundation, Inc. (GA)	69,658,157	150	30	1.27	21.33	1.03	8.44	142.22	6.89
85	The Greater Cincinnati Foundation (OH)	69,133,479	2,505	21	1.57	44.81	7.43	0.63	17.89	2.97
86	Dr Miriam and Sheldon G. Adelson Charitable Trust (NV)	68,544,048								
87	The Seattle Foundation (WA)	67,353,039	10,161	21	1.57	44.81	7.43	0.15	4.41	0.73
88	The Oregon Community Foundation (OR)	66,052,201	3,750	30	0.70	22.47	3.43	0.19	5.99	0.92
89	The Denver Foundation (CO)	64,306,537	3,539	17	5.47	64.12	5.59	1.55	18.12	1.58
90	The Heinz Endowments (PA)	61,124,899	54	30	0.03	1.97	0.03	0.62	36.42	0.62
91	The Sherwood Foundation (NE)	60,772,086								
92	S.D. Bechtel, Jr Foundation (CA)	59,422,815								
93	Marin Community Foundation (CA)	59,136,825	171	1	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
94	Caterpillar Foundation (IL)	59,031,292								
95	Donald W. Reynolds Foundation (NV)	58,939,931								
96	Barr Foundation (MA)	58,380,364								
97	Community Foundation of Greater Memphis (TN)	58,341,057	492	13	0.92	20.92	0.85	1.88	42.53	1.72
98	The Wallace Foundation (NY)	57,283,381	1,221	23	0.39	5.83	1.74	0.32	4.77	1.42
99	NoYo Foundation (NY)	56,715,829	550	1	1.00	4.00	0.00	1.82	7.27	0.00
100	The East Bay Community Foundation (CA)	55,965,031	764	20	0.70	11.40	0.80	0.92	14.92	1.05
	Mean	214,881,680	712,643	22.24	165.84	587.08	21.57	0.59	16.15	0.87
	Median	111,759,190	2,932	25.00	0.75	12.37	1.11	0.13	4.12	0.32
	SD	342,098,023.6	4,548,731	8.84	1,093.20	3,300.88	63.41	1.46	48.10	1.82

Hopkins and King, 2010). Social media analytics is a powerful tool for uncovering stakeholder sentiment dispersed across countless online sources. This analysis is often called “social media listening,” as the analytics allow marketers to identify sentiment and trends in order to better meet their customers’ needs (Ribarsky *et al.* 2014; Bekmamedova *et al.*, 2014). While social media analytics represents a fairly recent approach to the study of online interaction among organizations and their stakeholders (especially customers), content analysis is a method widely adopted in organization disclosure studies (Guthrie *et al.*, 2004) because it allows repeatability and valid inferences from data according to their context (Krippendorff, 1980). Content analysis is a summarizing process, a quantitative analysis of messages that relies on social scientific methods and is not limited to measurable variables or the context in which the messages are created or presented (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 10). In other words, it is a popular scholarly tool used by academics in the social sciences and humanities in which texts are studied in order to determine authorship, authenticity, or meaning. It is conceived as a technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specific characteristics of certain types of messages (Holsti, 1969).

We focus on Facebook because a preliminary assessment revealed that it was both the most popular social network (featuring approximately 1.591 million monthly active users) and the most adopted form of social media among the organizations in our sample. In fact, when we first analyzed a random sample of ten official websites, we determined that Facebook is always used when other social media (e.g. Twitter) are employed. However, when Facebook is not used, typically no other types of social media are utilized either.

Our preferred unit of data collection are the individual posts that are generated by the organization on its official Facebook page. We studied posts published in the ten weeks between September 1, 2014, and November 15, 2014. In order to maintain the feasibility of our analysis, we set a maximum threshold of 30 posts (three posts a week for ten weeks). We based our rationale on the preliminary observation that many of these foundations do not publish more than three posts a week.

We collected both quantitative and qualitative data. On the one hand, we assessed the number of “likes,” “comments,” and “sharing” each unit generated. “likes” represent user engagement and accumulate when the audience presses the “like” button, a feature available for each individual post and its comments (Ramanadhan *et al.*, 2013). At the same time, users can comment on posts and share with their contacts the posts they find interesting. Since foundations can also reply to user comments, we also assessed how frequently this type of two-way interaction happened. In addition to analyzing single posts, we also collected the value of “page likes” for individual Facebook pages. This data are relevant because it measures the extent to which social network users engage with the organizations in our study. This data were accumulated by studying each account on a unit-by-unit basis and carefully retrieving both quantitative data and qualitative data. Although web software can be used to count the total number of posts in a certain period, we opted for a manual approach. In the second step of our analysis, we classified each Facebook post using six possible categories in order to understand how large philanthropic foundations really utilize Facebook:

- (1) Awareness raising: we use this category for every post that is aimed at publicizing a social, political, environmental or health issue, a trend or a general topic. This category includes publication of information, news, and data.
- (2) User engagement: we use this category for posts that have a specific aim of involving users and/or gather their ideas or opinions. This category involves interactive posts that offer users the possibility of asking questions to representatives of the foundation, and posts that ask for opinions on certain topics, polls, etc.



- (3) The foundation and its projects: we use this category for posts about the foundation itself or its projects. This includes posts that present details on the foundation (such as staff interviews), change and new appointments in the organization chart, event updates from staff, and posts that provide more insights on the projects the foundations directly fund.
- (4) External initiatives: we use this category for posts that relate to specific external initiatives that are not directly funded or managed by the specific foundation, such as projects by other organizations or public initiatives.
- (5) Amusement: we use this category to classify posts containing contests, games, jokes, and greetings that are frequently proposed on Facebook in order to vitalize pages and accounts.
- (6) Other: this is a residual category for posts that do not fit in with the other classifications. When a post is classified in this manner, a brief description is added.

These categories are the result of a preliminary inquiry that was used to define and group all of the posts presented on the official Facebook pages of the foundations in our study, as well as a literature review on the role of foundations and social media (see Section 2). Posts categorized as User Engagement can be a vector of SE in a system of dialogic accounting.

In order to carry out this phase of the study, specific guidelines were defined and used by the research team. A list of detection and classification rules based on the contents and main keywords of each category was established and discussed with research team members, and the classification criteria for each category were subsequently identified. Afterwards, a preliminary test of the results of the coding procedure was conducted as a means of highlighting ambiguous or unclear coding rules and to standardize the classification capabilities of the researchers. The results of the individual classifications were then compared and the differences discussed with the two senior researchers. This preliminary activity resulted in a final set of detection and classification rules.

The third step of our analysis focuses on assessing which level and which type of interaction was effectively reached for every category of posts. We collected the number of likes, shares, and comments for every single post in each category. A high number of likes, shares, and comments could suggest a reasonable level of interaction between foundations and users. Moreover, we also investigated every comment in order to assess the general tenor of the discussion. We wanted to assess if feedback from users was more positively oriented (compliments for the foundations' activities, constructive proposals, etc.), negatively oriented (protests, constructive criticism, etc.), or neutral. We classified each comment with a value ranging from 1 (protest) to 5 (compliment). Comments with constructive criticism received a value of 2, constructive proposals received a value of 4, and neutral comments received a value of 3. Spam or off topic comments were excluded from the analysis. We then proceeded to build an index for every category of post that showed the average tone of comments, using a scale of 1-5.

Finally, we also tracked whether and how foundations reply to comments on their posts, thereby creating a true two-way conversation with users, and whether they communicate with each other on the foundation's Facebook page. In order to do this, we defined an "interaction ratio" that varies between 1 (the foundation replied or liked at least one user's comment in every post) and 0 (the foundation did not reply or like any comment). This was done in order to understand how often foundations take part in discussions in a true two-way perspective. We also verified whether the users interacted with each other on the foundation's Facebook page in order to understand the quality of the debate generated by the charitable organization.

## 5. Results

We determined that 59 of the top 100 US foundations have an active Facebook page that features at least one post in the period of our analysis. Since Facebook is an increasingly common tool of communication among companies and NPOs, we would have expected a higher percentage of users, especially among larger foundations.

Table I shows the amount of Facebook page likes (the number of Facebook users selected to “like” the official page of the foundation), the amount of posts published by the foundations on their official Facebook pages between the September 1 and the November 15, 2014, and the average number of comments, likes, and shares on those posts.

These 59 foundations produced an average of 712,643 page likes and 22 posts in the period of analysis. The posts we examined collected an average of 165 comments, 587 likes, and 21 shares per foundation. These are impressive values, many of which appear to be strongly influenced by the significant activity generated by larger foundations (e.g. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) and foundations that use the official Facebook page of their sibling company (e.g. The JP Morgan Chase Foundation and The WalMart Foundation).

If we calculate median instead of mean, more representative values emerge. Comprehensive mean, median and standard deviation values are showed at the bottom of Table I. Standard deviation values are fairly high because of a strong differentiation in terms of the size of the organizations within the sample and the scarce presence of foundations without a specific Facebook page who utilize a sister page (e.g. WalMart Foundation posts on WalMart Facebook page).

Building on Bonsón and Ratkai (2013) and Agostino and Arnaboldi (2016), we also calculated a commitment, popularity, and virality score for each organization. These metrics measure the commitment of fans (average number of comments per post  $\times$  1,000/number of pages likes), the popularity of posts among fans (average number of likes per post  $\times$  1,000/number of pages likes), and the virality of messages among fans (average number of shares per post  $\times$  1,000/number of pages likes). The scores were multiplied by 1,000 in order to offer a better comparison, as the original results were close to 0 (Bonsón and Ratkai, 2013). These scores are not correlated with the size of the organizations in terms of total giving (correlation of size with commitment score:  $-0.06$ ; popularity score:  $-0.05$ ; virality score:  $-0.07$ ), suggesting that a higher level of interaction with stakeholders on social media is not necessarily linked with a larger organization, and that smaller foundations have the potential to take full advantage of social media in order to interact with stakeholders.

Since the second part of our analysis focuses on the role of Facebook in spurring interaction between foundations and their stakeholders (and among stakeholders themselves) from a dialogic accounting perspective, we collected the number of posts published in the period of our analysis and we categorized them according to their aim and content. In Section 4 we introduce the list of categories and their description, together with the procedure we followed to ensure inter-coder reliability. Table II shows the results of our content analysis on posts and their relative Facebook statistics by category.

A total of 1,212 posts were manually analyzed and categorized for their content by the research team. Data on Facebook likes, comments, and sharing were collected. Since one of our objectives is to understand how NPOs use social media as a means of dialogic accounting, we also intend to provide more details on which kind of information foundations are more willing to disclose and collect on social media.

As Table II shows, posts that describe the organization itself and its activities (foundation and its activities: 55.61 percent) are the most common type of posts on Facebook, followed by posts that provide info, data, and news concerning social, economic, political or environmental topics (awareness raising: 21.53 percent). Tables III-VII contain a set of transcriptions for each category of posts. Although most user identities are blurred in

order to guarantee anonymity and privacy, the name of verified public profiles and pages (indicated on Facebook with a blue check mark) are shown.

We found that the contents of awareness raising posts are usually related to the mission of the foundation (e.g. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation often provides facts and updates on malaria in Africa). Awareness raising posts and posts that are about the foundation itself also collected the highest absolute and average number of likes and shares. A modest percentage of posts (8.83 percent) present specific external initiatives, providing information on projects that are not directly funded or managed by the foundation itself.

Quizzes, games, and other types of amusement-related contents produce the most amount of comments. However, only 14 of these types of posts were actually enumerated, thus confirming that Foundations primarily use Facebook pages to disseminate info on themselves and their activities.

In total, 43 posts attempted to engage users and stakeholders by asking for feedback (user engagement: 3.55 percent). These posts collected a high average number of likes (925)

	No. of posts	Total no. of likes	Likes (mean)	Total no. of shares	Shares (mean)	Total no. of comments	Comments (mean)
Awareness raising	261	286,186	1,062.98	8944	24.31	2,913	8.05
User engagement	43	42,161	924.61	864	16.45	581	11.51
Foundation and its projects	674	614,544	21,895.13	23,017	31.96	4,996	7.81
External initiatives	107	34,261	227.44	1,029	6.55	463	3.01
Amusement	14	3,505	141.56	412	11.18	637	18.18
Other	113	139,730	736.86	19,998	104.64	3,942	20.64
Total	1,212	1,120,387		54,264		13,532	
SD	246.51	233,599.53	8,693.96	10,206.95	36.49	1,970.96	6.72

**Table II.**  
Results of content analysis and Facebook data by types of post

*Post*

Rockefeller Foundation

September 4, 2014 (post's privacy set to "public")

100 Resilient Cities – pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation (link) officially launched their Facebook page this week. Keep up with all the latest news in urban resilience and the growing 100 Resilient Cities community by sending them a "Like"!

(link to the project page)

(75 likes) (9 comments) (0 shares)

*Examples of comment*

*Examples of replies by the foundation*

*Examples of replies by other users*

(Sandia National Labs) We're proud to partner with you on this project, Rockefeller Foundation! (1 like, 1 reply)

(Rockefeller Foundation) Likewise! (1 like)

–

If you have to ask people to send "a Like" the site is not resilient nor pioneering enough.

The cart is before the horse (0 likes, 2 replies)

(Rockefeller Foundation) Thanks for your reply, Bruce. Actually, the site has been successfully active for a while (100resilientcities.org). Our grantee, 100 Resilient Cities, just launched their Facebook page and we're encouraging our Facebook community – especially those interested in resilience and cities – to check them out. They do have some great content! (1 like)

–

**Table III.**  
Sample Facebook post on "foundation and its activities"

AAAJ  
30,4

892

**Table IV.**Sample Facebook  
post on  
“awareness raising”*Post*

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

November 5, 2014 (Post’s privacy set to “public”)

Who would have health insurance if Medicaid expansion weren’t optional? The Upshot (link) considers New Mexico and Texas, two states with the highest rates of the uninsured in 2013. The gray arrow shows how much the uninsured rate has declined in the last year, according to Enroll America and Civis Analytics (link) data. In reality, New Mexico expanded its program while Texas did not. The green arrow shows the estimate for how much more Texas’ rate might have declined if it had expanded, too

(image showing data on Medicaid)

(13 likes) (1 comments) (2 shares)

*Examples of comment*

Medicaid is not insurance – and when more and more providers are refusing to accept patients on that program – it is worth nearly nothing (0 likes)

*Examples of replies by  
the foundation**Examples of replies  
by other users*

–

–

**Table V.**Sample Facebook  
post on  
“external initiatives”*Post*

The Seattle Foundation

November 5, 2014 (Post’s privacy set to “public”)

Congratulations to Seattle Seahawks’ Russell Wilson (link) for the launch of his new charitable foundation, the “Why Not You” foundation. Seattle Foundation staff members Fidelma McGinn and Mary Grace Roske were able to congratulate Russell in person at the kickoff event last night. And kudos to Russell Investments (link), who announced that in addition to donating \$3,000 each time Russell Wilson scores a touchdown, they also are making a \$10,000 contribution to his foundation! The foundation will focus on Russell’s passion of impacting and influencing kids’ lives

(group photo with Russell Wilson)

(281 likes) (11 comments) (22 shares)

*Examples of comment*

Proud to be part of TSF! (1 likes)

*Examples of replies by the foundation**Examples of replies by other users*

–

–

Gotta love this guy! (0 likes)

–

–

Proud to be a Board member of the TSF! (2 likes) (Foundation liked this comment)

and produced a significant amount of comments (a mean of 12 per post). Although foundations do not often consider Facebook as a tool for engaging users and stakeholders, posts that aim at creating a two-way, dialogic conversation tend to collect a higher number of likes and comments, thus demonstrating that Facebook users often react to calls for interaction. In this sense, a high number of likes, shares, and comments suggests a wider level of interaction between foundations and users and among users themselves. For instance, Table VI shows a post in which Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, interacts with Sue Desmond-Hellman, the CEO of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and other Facebook users. This is one of many posts in which users both interact with the foundation and each other with comments and likes.

In order to provide a further confirmation of this preliminary evidence, the third part of our analysis assesses the level and the type of interaction between foundations and users for each category of posts, while also investigating the tenor of these comments and the replies that were posted by the foundations and other users. This is relevant in order to understand if social media actually are tools of SE for charitable foundations, and whether they are capable of contributing to the decision-making process.

Table VIII shows, for each category of posts, the number of posts with comments, an index describing the tenor of comments, and an index representing the level of interaction between foundations and users.

*Post*

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

November 3, 2014 (Post's privacy set to "public")

Hi, I'm Sue Desmond-Hellmann (link), the CEO at the Gates Foundation. I'll be here at 9 a.m. PST to answer your questions in the comments below on Ebola and what we can do to stop this outbreak and prevent similar global health events in the future. Looking forward to talking with you.

(photo of Sue Desmond-Hellman)

(1,467 likes) (315 comments) (269 shares)

*Examples of comment*

(Mark Zuckerberg) Thanks Sue for everything you and the Gates Foundation are doing to fight Ebola. And thanks for taking the time to do this Q&A and answer our questions! (105 likes, 13 replies)

Hi Sue! Are there any opportunities for young scientists (or young people in general) to help contain/fight Ebola? Thanks! (1 like, 5 replies)

I believe more public awareness is crucial in preventing another crisis like this again [...] How may we best come together and educate local communities? (4 likes, 2 replies)

*Examples of replies by the foundation*

Thank you Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan for your generosity in funding the Ebola response. And thank you to you and your colleagues at Facebook for giving me a platform to get out the facts. Sue Desmond-Hellmann (24 likes)

Thanks for your question. I'm pleased to begin this Facebook Q&A on Ebola. Young scientists and all young people can help their colleagues and mentors remember that problems affecting those in poor countries matter for all of us. Great labs focusing on issues like Ebola helps all of us prevent future outbreaks. Sue Desmond-Hellmann (3 likes)

I agree that we need much more public awareness about global health and development as well as science in general. I am doing this Facebook Q&A to help get the word out, but many colleagues are also working with community leaders, churches and other local sources of information to help educate people on Ebola and other important health matters. I'd encourage everyone on social media to use trusted sources for fact-based information sharing and avoid fear and hyperbole. Sue Desmond-Hellmann (3 likes)

*Examples of replies by other users*

Zucky! Improve the Facebook application please! (1 like)

I've been trying to get this answered, as well. The only response I've gotten was to donate money, which infuriates me, since I constantly donate. I presume the answer is that there is no place for us in this battle. If I was a physician, I would've likely gone over to help (0 likes)

A great question mate looking for the reply by foundation (happy emoticon) (0 likes)

**Table VI.**  
Sample Facebook post  
on "user engagement"

*Post*

Bank of America

November 6, 2014 (Post's privacy set to "public")

In 1955, it cost a quarter to go to the movies and milk was 92¢ a gallon. But how much did it cost to fly? (quiz photo with four possible answers)

(246 likes) (79 comments) (15 shares)

*Examples of comment*

1,168. (3 likes)

C (0 likes)

B (0 likes)

*Examples of replies by the foundation*

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–

–

*Examples of replies by other users*

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–

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**Table VII.**  
Sample Facebook post  
on "amusement"

We want to determine if feedback from users are more positively oriented, negatively oriented, or neutral. In order to assess the general tenor of the discussion, we investigated the contents and tone of each comment, and built an index – ranging from 1 (critical) and 5 (supportive) – following the procedure described in Section 4. We found that the average tenor of comments to posts published by large philanthropic foundations is mildly positive. As Table VIII shows, values for posts related to awareness raising, user engagement, foundations and its projects, and external initiatives achieved scores that ranged between 3 and 4 (the amusement category was the only one to achieve a mildly negative score). User interaction posts presented a “Tenor of comments index” of 3.44.

An analysis of the values of this index can help us understand if the interaction produced by these foundations is geared toward generating a consensus necessary to achieve decision-making power that is shared between all stakeholders (Laughlin, 1987, 2007; Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1989) or if a divergent and agonistic perspective, which highlights struggles and differences between actors, prevails (Gray, 2002; O’Dwyer, 2005; Brown and Dillard, 2013a, b):

- Table IX shows an example of a Facebook post that garnered several “likes” and positive comments, suggesting a convergent “Habermasian” tendency.
- Table X shows a post that garnered numerous negative and critical comments, suggesting a more agonistic and divergent attitude between users and the organization.

In both cases user identities (except for those of verified public figures and pages) are blurred for anonymity.

We could interpret the moderately positive values of the tenor of comments index as proof of a deliberative approach. However, we believe it is necessary to assume a cautious position, as we are dealing with philanthropic organizations (most of which originated from capitalist ventures) whose activities are less likely to result in significant expressions of dissent. In fact, engagement appears to be more oriented toward Facebook users than toward the foundation’s stakeholders, two groups whose interests only partially overlap. For this reason, it looks like the consensus that many of these foundations seem to be searching for is related to the dissemination of their activities and self-legitimization (Clarkson *et al.*, 2011) rather than their attempts to engage in a deliberative form of politics.

Finally, since we intend to examine the contribution of social media to SE in a framework of dialogic accounting, we also tried to assess whether foundations create a true two-way conversation with users and whether users dialogue each other. The “interaction ratio” presented in Table VIII indicates, for each category of posts, if and how foundations reply to comments on their posts. User engagement posts produced the highest interaction ratio (0.56), thereby confirming that the foundation does pursue this type interaction in that

**Table VIII.**  
Insights on the level of interaction and the tenor of individual comments

	No. of posts with comment	Tenor of comments (index)	Interaction (index)
Awareness raising	105	3.43	0.43
User engagement	19	3.44	0.56
Foundation and its projects	315	4.00	0.26
External initiatives	31	3.70	0.15
Amusement	10	2.07	0.52
Other	52	2.76	0.28
Total	532		
Average	88.67	3.23	0.37
SD	115.94	0.70	0.16

*Post*

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

October 8, 2014 (Post's privacy set to "public")

This is one example of what innovation looks like

If you've ever been to the hospital, you might have worn a device on your finger that measures the oxygen in your blood. Those devices are connected to large, bulky machines that are very costly to purchase.

But if you could turn that same device into a simple phone app, you'd be able to make important diagnoses anywhere, and for as little as \$40

The best part? This innovation exists today. Learn more: (link) (video)

(1,057 likes) (73 comments) (239 shares)

*Examples of comment*

Thanks so much for such a great video on our innovation! You can buy the Kenek Edge pulse oximeter today on Amazon.com. Your purchase will help to support saving women and children around the world (12 likes)

Love this new innovation! I would purchase it. I saw today at Dr Office who had a very small portable pulse and O2 measuring device. To have even this one at home is great idea for pregnant women. Anyone! An important indicator of possible health issues. You will be surprised how many OB/GYN offices don't carry machine to measure oxygen/oximeters. Luckily, they all have blood pressure machine). So great to know that with this you are helping women around the world as mentioned (8 likes)

This is great! (3 likes)

*Examples of replies by the foundation*

Thanks for weighing in, (username). – Brycie (5 likes)

*Examples of replies by other users*

Can you purchase it anywhere? My daughter is a doctor in Malawi and I am sure could definitely use it (0 likes)

**Table IX.**  
Transcription of a Facebook post that presents a convergent interaction

specific category of posts. In fact, foundations effectively took part in the conversation, answering or liking users' contributions, in more than half of posts that were published with the aim of engage users and stakeholder.

Amusement and awareness raising posts also showed interesting values (0.52 and 0.43, respectively) while foundations and its project and external initiative got low and very low values (0.26 and 0.15, respectively).

Table VI shows an example of a post characterized by a high interaction ratio: this is particularly interesting because it illustrates just one of many posts in which users comment and like on the comments of other users. On the opposite, Table VII contains a post with a low interaction ratio. If, on the one hand, our analysis of posts with high levels of interaction suggests that the dialogue between users appears to be deliberative, the nature of the discourse between users and foundations is more various, ranging from a monologic (low number of comments, likes, and sharing) to both deliberative and agonistic polylogic interaction (with a high amount of positive and negative feedback, respectively), with the deliberative approach showing up more often.

**6. Conclusions**

The most common use of social media by organizations, politicians, and public relations professionals is unidirectional, oriented to image marketing, and focused on raising money or encouraging sales, rather than producing a dialogue with stakeholders (Kent, 2013). Like other

AAAJ  
30,4

896

*Post*

Chase

October 3, 2014 (Post's privacy set to "public")

Our friends at College Track (link) are empowering students from underserved communities to reach their dream of a college degree. We joined Sacramento's Mayor Johnson in celebrating the opening of College Track's new College Access Center. To learn more, visit: (link)

(photo of college students)

(41 likes) (11 comments) (2 shares)

*Examples of comment*

Thanks Chase for protecting my personal information. (sarcasm intended) You guys are not even offering any credit monitoring because you "claim" no account information was hacked. Really? Lots of damage can be done by having ALL my personal information such as address, full name, e-mail address and phone numbers, etc. compromised. (with the intent of that information being sold on internet sites to fraudsters) Chase even ADMITS that all that information was indeed breached. That is not in dispute. Chase claims that no ss# or actual account information was hacked, yet all other account info was compromised. Again, Really? Are your 80 million + customers supposed to re-assured by that? How do you know for a fact that is indeed the case? I think Chase should now step up to the plate and offer free credit monitoring service to their customers (4 likes)

Funny, because Chase has the worst standards when it comes to anything in their college divisions. College checking accounts are only good for 5 years and then need a DAILY balance of AT LEAST \$5,000! If you don't meet this daily balance, you get charged a service fee monthly. And don't even get me started on the student loan department! I've been told since 2009 that my loans would remain in deferment for the ENTIRE TIME that I was in school. Now in my second year of graduate school, I am getting letters in the mail asking me to start paying in April of 2015, when I will only graduate in May of 2016. I am getting so sick and tired of dealing with Chase. The only reason I still have an account with them is because of the student loans that I now regret EVER having taken from Chase (0 likes)

*Examples of replies by the foundation*

(username), we understand your frustration; however, there is no evidence that account information was compromised and we haven't seen unusual fraud activity. Since no financial, account or Social Security numbers were breached, we aren't offering free credit monitoring. For more info, see: (link) (0 likes)

Hi Ashley Pereira (link), we are – very sorry to hear you are frustrated and would like to look into this. Will you please give us a call at 1-800-489-5005 or send us a tweet us @ChaseSupport so that we can identify your account and better assist you? (0 likes)

*Examples of replies by other users*

You say the ss# and account numbers were not breached, however Chase also assured my personal information was safe when I opened my accounts. So, was I being lied to then, or now? Additionally, Chase may not see an increase in fraudulent activity if someone uses MY PERSONAL information to open accounts with other credit card companies or financial institutions. Of course you WOULD NOT see that. But I most certainly will. Thanks again for having the customers best interest in mind. (Yes, sarcasm intended) (0 likes)

**Table X.**

Transcription of a Facebook post that presents a high level of divergent interaction



forms of new technology, social media offers a unique opportunity for further development. In spite of the enormous potential of social media, these online tools tend to be used asymmetrically. Although one-way communication is still the most common form of strategy adopted by organizations on social media (Waters and Jamal, 2011; Xifra and Grau, 2010), attempts to develop interactions among corporations and users are becoming increasingly popular (Rybako and Seltzer, 2010). Exploratory studies posit that social media are dialogic, but that the operationalization of dialogue often looks like online advertising and product promotion (Kent, 2013). Nevertheless, in the field of social responsibility, social media are considered as one of the most important tools in promoting SE (Park and Reber, 2008; Porter, 2001; Rybako and Seltzer, 2010; Unerman and Bennett, 2004).

This study explores the utilization of Facebook as a tool of dialogic accounting in philanthropic foundations, placing special emphasis on its value in identifying, dialoguing with, and engaging organization stakeholders, while also taking into account their opinions and expectations, even if they diverge from the organization's point of view. In order to explore our research motivation, we studied the main characteristics of the 100 biggest US Philanthropic Foundations and ran a content analysis on their official Facebook pages.

We found that there are huge discrepancies in terms of how many US foundations are using Facebook. Only 59 of the 100 biggest US Foundations have an official Facebook page. In a few cases (e.g. Walmart and J.P. Morgan) foundations rely on the Facebook page of the parent company. Out of these 59 organizations, only 15 foundations had an average number of comments on their posts that was higher than 2. On the one hand, only a minority of these organizations seem to rely on social media as a platform upon which to collect feedback and interact with stakeholders. On the other hand, a few organizations (e.g. the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the California Endowment) appear to have deployed a dedicated staff to interact with Facebook users on their official pages. These foundations publish new posts nearly every day, accurately replying to users' comments and often offering the possibility of interacting with the staff through "Question and Answer" sessions. As a result, we can define three different types of foundations: 1) the 41 percent that does not use Facebook or other social media; 2) the 44 percent that uses Facebook but with limited interaction, producing a brand of communication that is more "monologic" than "dialogic"; 3) the 15 percent (the most interesting for the present study) that is engaged in using Facebook as a two-way, dialogic communication tool; these organizations appear to consider social media as a tool of dialogic accounting that can help them gather information and feedback and define future strategies.

Our research also allows us to provide more details in terms of which kind of information foundations are more willing to disclose and collect on social media. Our content analysis found that posts that describe the organization itself and its activities, and those that provide info, data, and news concerning social, economic, political or environmental topics are most prevalent on the Facebook pages of various philanthropic foundations. These two types of posts collected the highest absolute and average number of likes and shares. Forty-three posts tried to engage users and stakeholders and/or ask for feedback. Although foundations do not often consider Facebook as a tool for engaging users and stakeholders, posts that aim at creating a two-way, dialogic conversation tend to collect a higher number of likes and comments, thus demonstrating that Facebook users often react to calls for interaction. If the level and the nature of the interaction between users and foundations are various, depend on the willingness of the specific foundation to rely on Facebook as a platform upon which to communicate with stakeholders, and, thus, need to be analyzed case by case, the interaction between users has more consistent characteristics. In posts where a discussion is formed, users usually interact both with the foundation that published the post and other users. In such cases, our content analysis confirms that users usually comment and like each other's comments in a deliberative perspective.

Our study also tries to evaluate the level and type of interaction between foundations and users, and among users themselves for each category of posts. This enables us to understand if the interaction produced by these foundations is geared toward generating the type of consensus necessary to achieve the type of decision-making powers that are shared between all stakeholders (Laughlin, 1987, 2007; Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1989) or if a divergent and agonistic perspective, which highlights struggles and differences between actors, prevails (Gray, 2002; O'Dwyer, 2005; Brown and Dillard, 2013a, b). We found that the average tenor of comments on posts published by large philanthropic foundations is slightly positive. This could suggest a deliberative perspective, although it is important to note that we are dealing with philanthropic organizations whose activities are less likely to produce dissent. Our evidence also suggests that foundations seem to be searching for self-legitimization rather than a deliberative approach that is useful in terms of defining their strategies. That the nature of the organization can influence the type of interaction is confirmed by the more negative tone of comments found on the Facebook pages of foundations that rely on the page of the sibling company (e.g. Walmart and J.P. Morgan). Indeed, in these cases, critical posts are common and a more divergent and agonistic interaction is produced.

Do foundations use social media with the intent of creating a system of dialogic interaction on social, environmental or financial topics with stakeholders (stakeholder theory) or do they use social media to change their reputation among their stakeholders and Facebook users, thereby legitimizing their social license to operate (legitimacy theory)? We provided evidence and examples that suggest that a case by case evaluation is essential. Interestingly enough, several foundations are particularly willing to take advantage of Facebook, not only as an opinion-collecting platform, but also as a public arena in which to mutually interact with users and stakeholders. It is possible to assume, then, that these foundations have made the first steps toward using Facebook as a tool of SE. At the same time, most organizations either do not use Facebook or use it in a very limited manner; these foundations disseminate their activities in a way that reinforces the legitimacy theory perspective, using Facebook to simply legitimize their activities rather than interact with users on important economic, social, or environmental issues.

It should also be noted that there some types of posts – especially those that aim to engage users – in which foundations accept the risk of exposing themselves to negative feedback while still managing to create a dialogic communication. However, many foundations are happy to simply disseminate information on their activities by adopting a cautious, monologic outlook.

The results of our study present at least two set of practical implications. First, Facebook has proved to be a useful and effective tool for foundations that are willing to find a new way to interact with their stakeholders in a dialogic manner. By establishing a small team dedicated to Facebook interaction, foundations could use the world's most popular social media website to create a public space in which to both pass along information to stakeholders and receive important feedback from them. As the absence of correlation of popularity, virality, and commitment scores with size confirms, establishing a strong interaction on social media with stakeholders is also possible among organizations with smaller budgets. Second, these foundations must commit to an authentic dialogic conversation if they want to take full advantage of Facebook's interactive features. If organizations address every comment in a constructive way and accept that conversations can also lead to negative feedback, Facebook can act as a powerful tool in articulating the organization's objectives, activities, and outcomes.

In light of the above, we believe that our results can contribute to the extant literature on dialogic accounting, highlighting that among philanthropic institutions there is preliminary evidence suggesting that a small number of organizations use Facebook for supporting

dialogic accounting systems by providing valuable information on what stakeholders expect of each organization in terms of information processing. In these cases, Facebook represents a platform where the organization recognizes multiple points of views, rejecting the idea of a universal narrative, and where the institution is exposed to diverse perspectives and interests from multiple parties. These types of activities seem to be oriented toward reaching a general consensus on how to address specific issues.

The current study has at least three limitations and as many opportunities for further research. For starters, this is an exploratory research study. We wanted to provide insight on how often (and to what extent) large organizations use social media, and if they are willing to strive for a dialogic interaction with stakeholders and users. Further research should involve in-depth case studies that look at how foundations that invest in social network interaction (e.g. the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) manage their profiles, while also interviewing representatives of the management/staff in order to understand what they expect from social media and the impact this type of interaction has on the organization's strategies. Further studies should also employ interviews and/or questionnaires, and address questions concerning who is posting, what might explain a high or low number of likes and comments, how features of communication on social media change over time, and how the guidelines for the management of official social media accounts come into being. Moreover, such in-depth, qualitative studies could help us understand if interaction on social media is really motivated by a willingness to involve stakeholders and collect strategic information, or if it is another way to achieve self-legitimization and manage its reputation through the dissemination of activities and results.

Second, although Facebook appeared to be the most popular form social media in our sample, Twitter, the micro-blog website that enables users to communicate through messages that are no longer than 140 characters, is increasingly popular among companies and NPOs, and could be an interesting platform upon which to broaden our analysis.

Finally, this research focuses solely on North American charitable foundations. Future studies should take into account different kinds of NPOs – e.g. charities, voluntary organizations, and social enterprises in different sectors and countries – and examine the different kinds of interaction that are often created through social media.

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