

# GRANTEES' LIMITED ENGAGEMENT WITH FOUNDATIONS' SOCIAL MEDIA

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**SOCIAL MEDIA IS INCREASINGLY VIEWED AS A POWERFUL VEHICLE TO AID SOCIAL CHANGE.** In 2011, social media tools played a role in the political mobilization in the Middle East that came to be known as the Arab Spring. For example, a “Day of Revolution” Facebook page was created to organize widespread protests in Egypt and more than 90,000 people signed up on this page.<sup>1</sup> Less positive uses of social media also emerged during the Arab Spring—demonstrating the “double-edged nature of new media.”<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, an outpouring of reactions via social media likely contributed to Susan G. Komen for the Cure reversing its decision to no longer make grants to Planned Parenthood.<sup>3</sup> The degree of public outcry was notable for its immediacy and for its effect on the mainstream media’s coverage of what may have otherwise transpired with little public notice.

In light of such developments, it is not surprising that foundations are investing in social media tools. These tools can serve myriad functions for foundations, from promoting a culture of transparency to the public at large, to influencing thought leaders, to connecting with grantees.<sup>4</sup> Because grantmaking foundations accomplish their goals largely through the nonprofits they fund, this paper focuses on the last function, even though we fully recognize that some foundations may not see grantees as a key audience for their social media efforts.

Even those that do see grantees as an audience for their social media don't necessarily share the same goals. Some foundations might aim simply to share information with grantees, while others may be trying to engage grantees in interactions with the foundation and its staff. We do not aim here to examine the various reasons foundations may be using social media but rather to address a very basic question: Are grantees using their foundation funders' social media?

To address this question, in 2011 the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) collected survey responses from more than 6,000 grantees about their experiences with one of the 34 foundations in this study.<sup>5</sup>

We found that:

- » The majority of foundations use social media tools in their work.
- » Very few grantees use social media from their foundation funders or their funders' staff.
- » Grantees that do use foundations' social media find those resources less helpful than other communication resources for learning about the foundation.

## Foundations and Nonprofits Included in This Research

The median asset size of the 34 foundations included in this research is roughly \$370 million, and the typical foundation in this group grants \$17 million annually. These foundations represent a mix of types, including private, community, and health conversion funders.

The individual at the grantee organization who responded to our survey is most often in a leadership position. Executive directors or CEOs make up 40 percent of respondents, 20 percent are program directors, and 14 percent hold other senior management positions at the nonprofit organization. The median annual operating budget of the nonprofits in this research is \$1.3 million.

## What We Mean by "Social Media"

There are various terms used to describe the many online communication tools available today. We have chosen the term "social media" in this report to represent the use of four specific online tools: blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and video sharing (e.g., YouTube), which we refer to as "videos."

<sup>1</sup> Kareem Fahim and Mona El-Naggar, "Violent Clashes Mark Protests against Mubarak's Rule," *The New York Times* (January 25, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Scott Shane, "Spotlight Again Falls on Web Tools and Change," *The New York Times* (January 30, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Panepento, "Social Media Fuel Debate as a Big Charity Cuts Off Planned Parenthood Aid," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy's* "Social Philanthropy" blog (February 1, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> See: The Communications Network's "Foundation Communications Today" 2011 Report; Council on Foundations toolkit, "Getting Started with Social Media"; Beth Kanter, "How Much Time Does It Take to Do Social Media?" Beth's Blog (October 2008).

<sup>5</sup> These questions were included in a broader survey that explored dimensions of foundation performance ranging from relationships with grantees to perceptions of foundation impact on the grantee organization, local community, and field. For more details, see Appendix: Methodology.

## Foundations Embrace Social Media

Of the foundations in this research, 71 percent have either posted videos or have a Twitter account, a Facebook page, or a blog. Slightly more than half have adopted at least three of these four tools.

Videos have been the most widely embraced medium by foundations—68 percent of foundations have posted videos. More than half have a Twitter or Facebook account, but only 29 percent have a blog. (See Figure 1.)

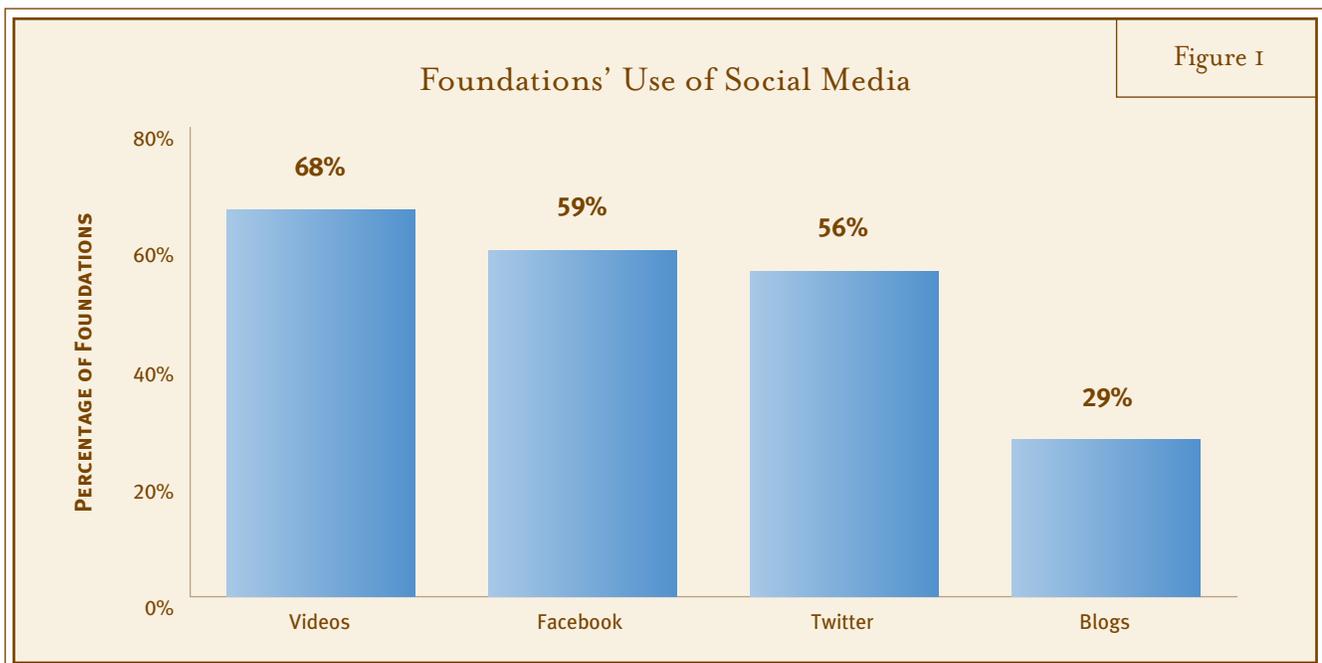
The majority of these foundations are investing some effort in social media, but are their grantees paying attention to these resources?

## Are Foundations Actively Using Their Social Media Tools?

To understand the extent to which foundations are using their social media tools, we examined how often each foundation posted videos or added updates to its Facebook page, Twitter account, or blogs over the three-month period preceding the close of the grantee survey rounds in 2011.

Of the foundations that do use these tools, their frequency of use varied considerably during this period. Some funders were heavy users of their organizational accounts on social media, while others hardly used them.<sup>6</sup> This variation existed for all four of the social media tools that we examined. Of these four, video was the tool most infrequently used by foundations. During the three-month period we examined, we were unable to locate any videos posted by 14 of the 23 foundations that had used videos in the past.

No relationship was found between the frequency of foundations' usage of social media tools and the proportion of their grantees accessing those tools.



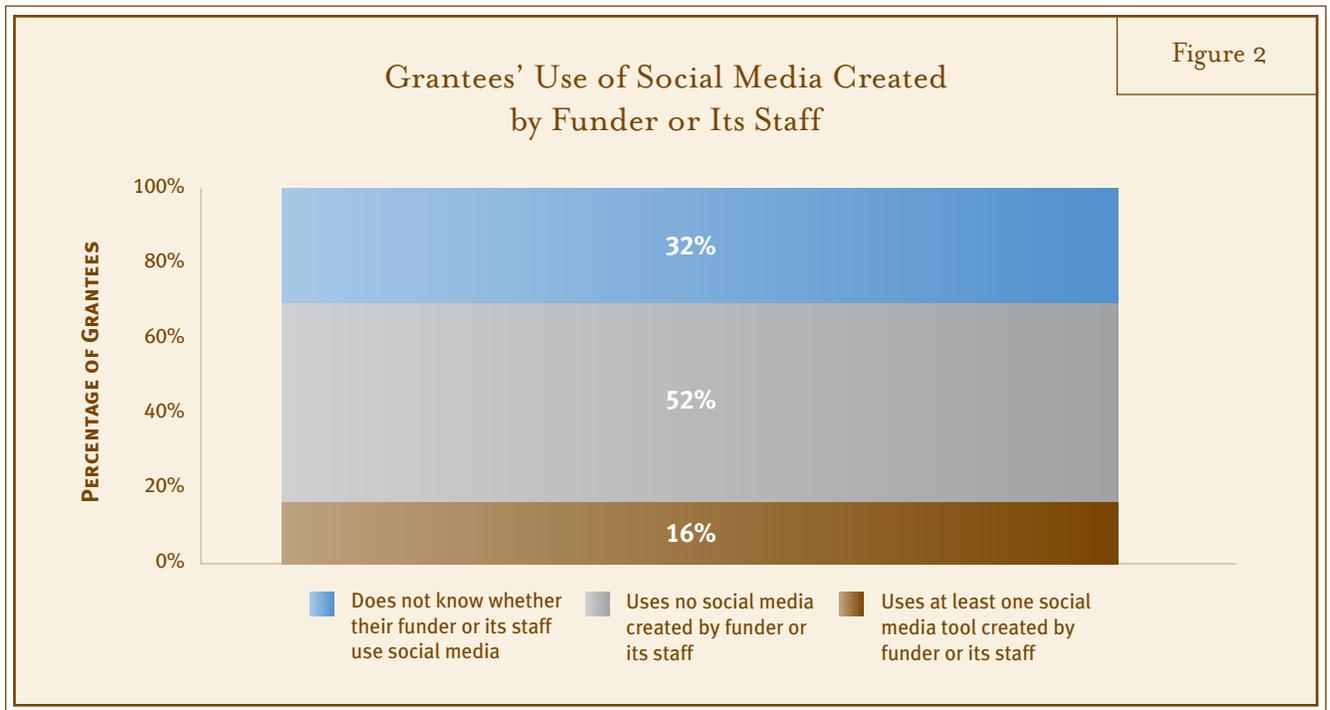
<sup>6</sup> This information rings true with a 2010 Foundation Center report, which found that fewer than one-third of foundation CEOs are using online communication tools on a regular basis. See the Foundation Center's report: "Are Foundation Leaders Using Social Media?" (September 2010).



## Grantees Are Not Engaging with Their Foundation Funders' Social Media

Despite the availability of foundations' social media, few grantees are accessing these resources. Only 16 percent of grantees surveyed report using social media created by their foundation funder or its staff.<sup>7</sup> Almost one-third of grantees report that they don't know whether their funder or its staff use any of the social media resources examined in this research. (See Figure 2.)

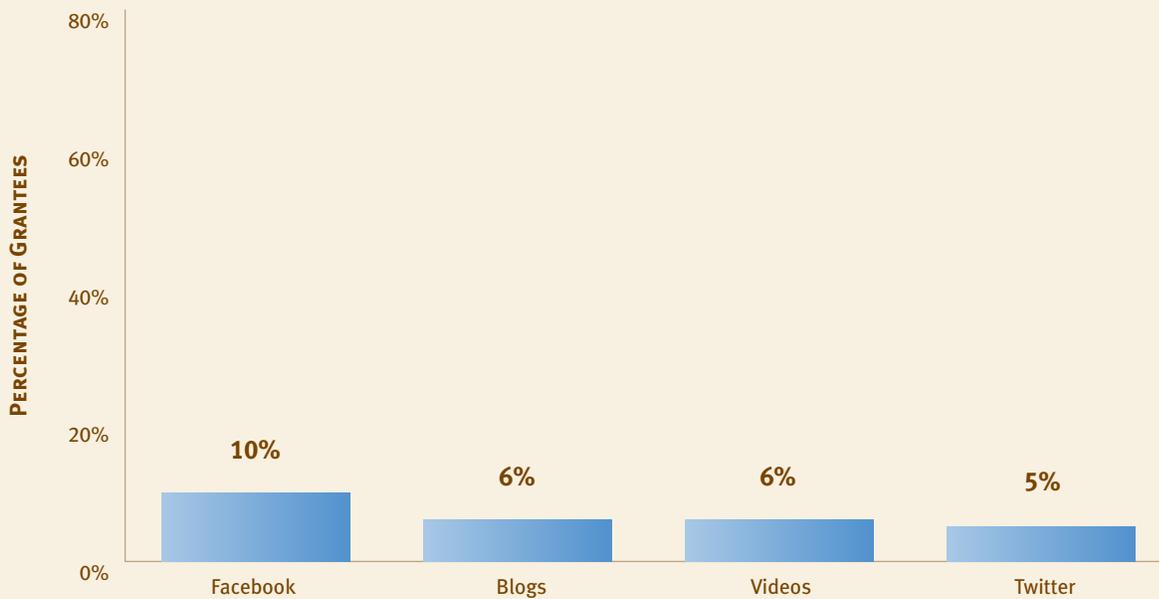
Of the social media resources examined, Facebook pages are the most commonly accessed by grantees, but only 10 percent of grantees are using them. (See Figure 3.)



<sup>7</sup> The item in our survey used to gather this data asked grantee respondents to indicate whether they "have used any of the following online resources" created by their foundation funder or its staff. The response options were "Blog(s)," "Facebook," "Twitter," "Video Sharing (e.g., YouTube)," "None of the above," or "I don't know whether the foundation uses these online media resources."

Grantees' Use of Individual Social Media Tools Created by Funder or Its Staff

Figure 3



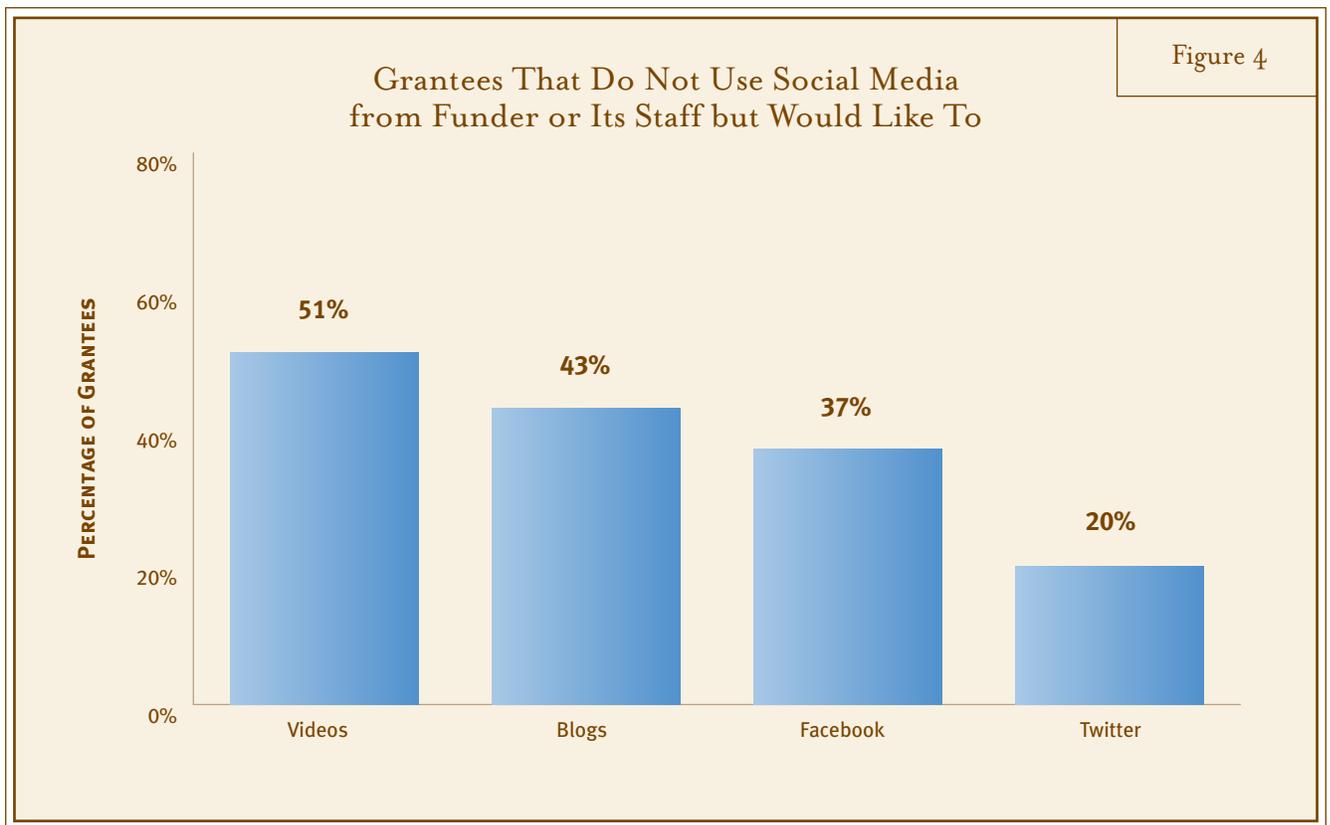
This finding raises the question, why are grantees not using their foundation funders' social media? (See sidebar: "Questions This Research Raises.") We examined two potential explanations. First, grantees simply are not interested in using their funders' social media. Second, grantee organizations lack familiarity or comfort with social media. Our data suggest that the first explanation may be part of the story, but that the second does not appear to be an issue.

Fifty-one percent of grantees report that they would use their funder's videos if their funder made videos available. A slightly smaller proportion of grantees report that they would use a blog or Facebook page from their funder or its staff. (See Figure 4.) Yet, most of the grantees that said they would use their funder's video, Facebook, or Twitter resources if available were responding about funders that we found to have these resources already available.

### Questions This Research Raises

Our findings raise a number of questions for future research:

- » How do grantees want to engage with their foundation funders' social media?
- » How have foundations and their staff communicated to grantees about the availability of their social media resources?
- » Is the content of funders' social media posts and updates relevant to grantees?
- » Who within the grantee organizations are funders trying to reach with their social media?



The large majority of a typical foundation's grantees—80 percent—use social media for their own work. On average, grantee organizations are using between two and three types of social media to communicate about their own work, with Facebook as the most widely used resource. (See Figure 5.) Social media usage can differ greatly among individuals, though, and the individual at a grantee organization who is responding to our survey may not necessarily be one of the people using social media at his or her organization.

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### More Conventional Resources Deemed More Helpful

Among the different modes of communication grantees use with foundations, social media is not seen by grantees to be as helpful as other communication resources. On average, grantees find social media to be less helpful for learning about the foundation than individual communication with foundation staff, group meetings with foundation staff, foundations' published funding guidelines, and foundations' websites. (See Figure 6.) The greatest differences in helpfulness ratings exist between the in-person communication resources—individual and group meetings with foundation staff—and social media.

Figure 5

### Grantee Organizations' Use of Social Media to Communicate about Their Own Work

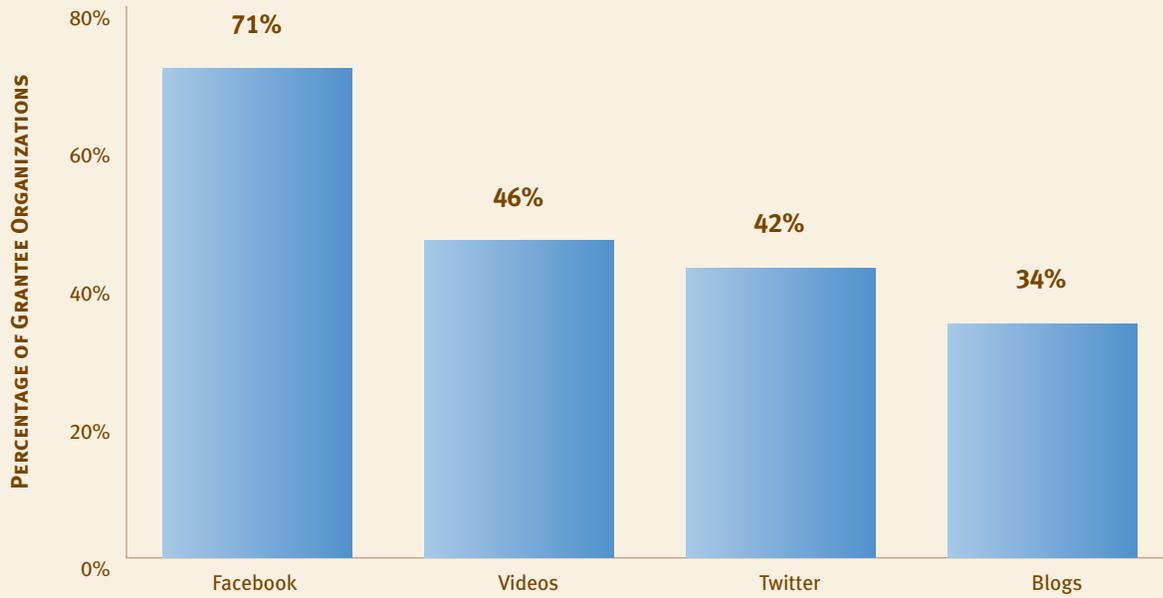
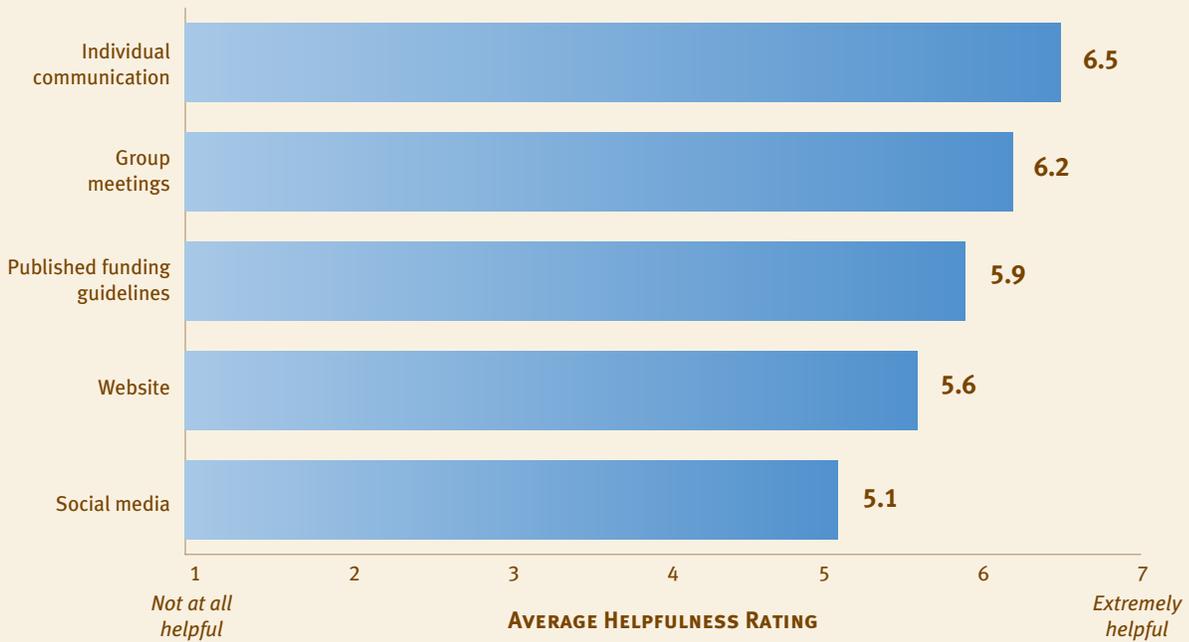
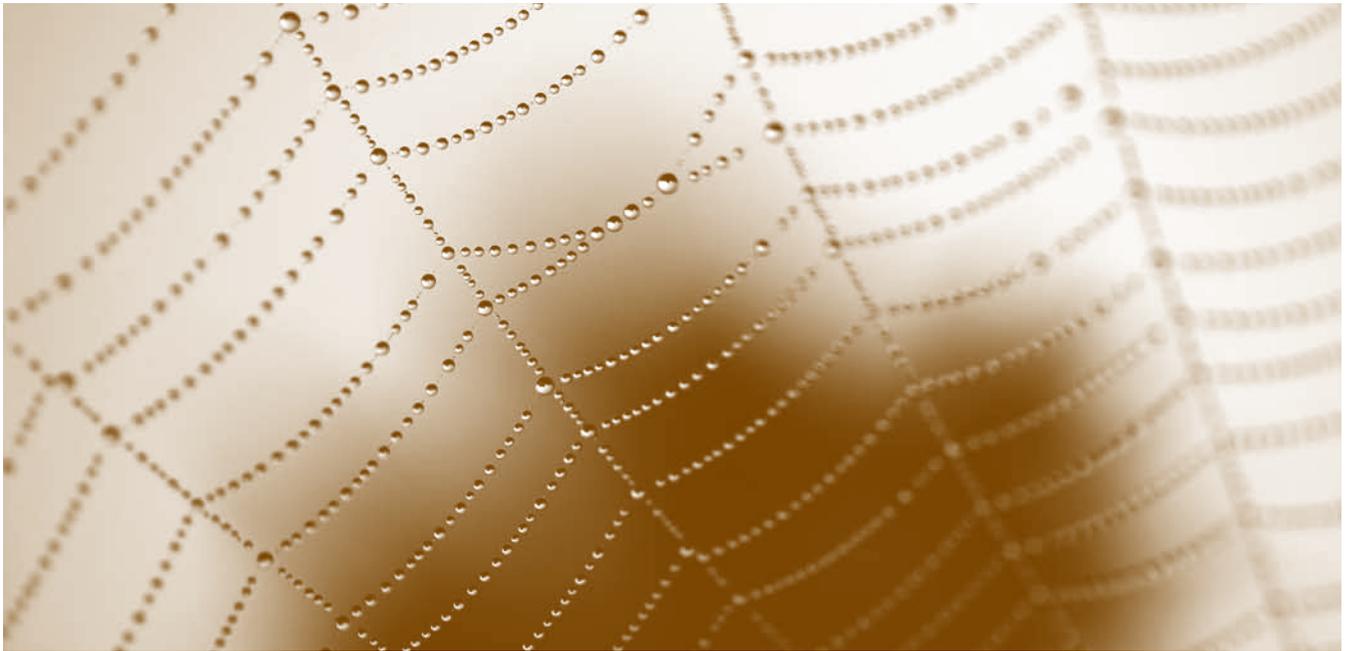


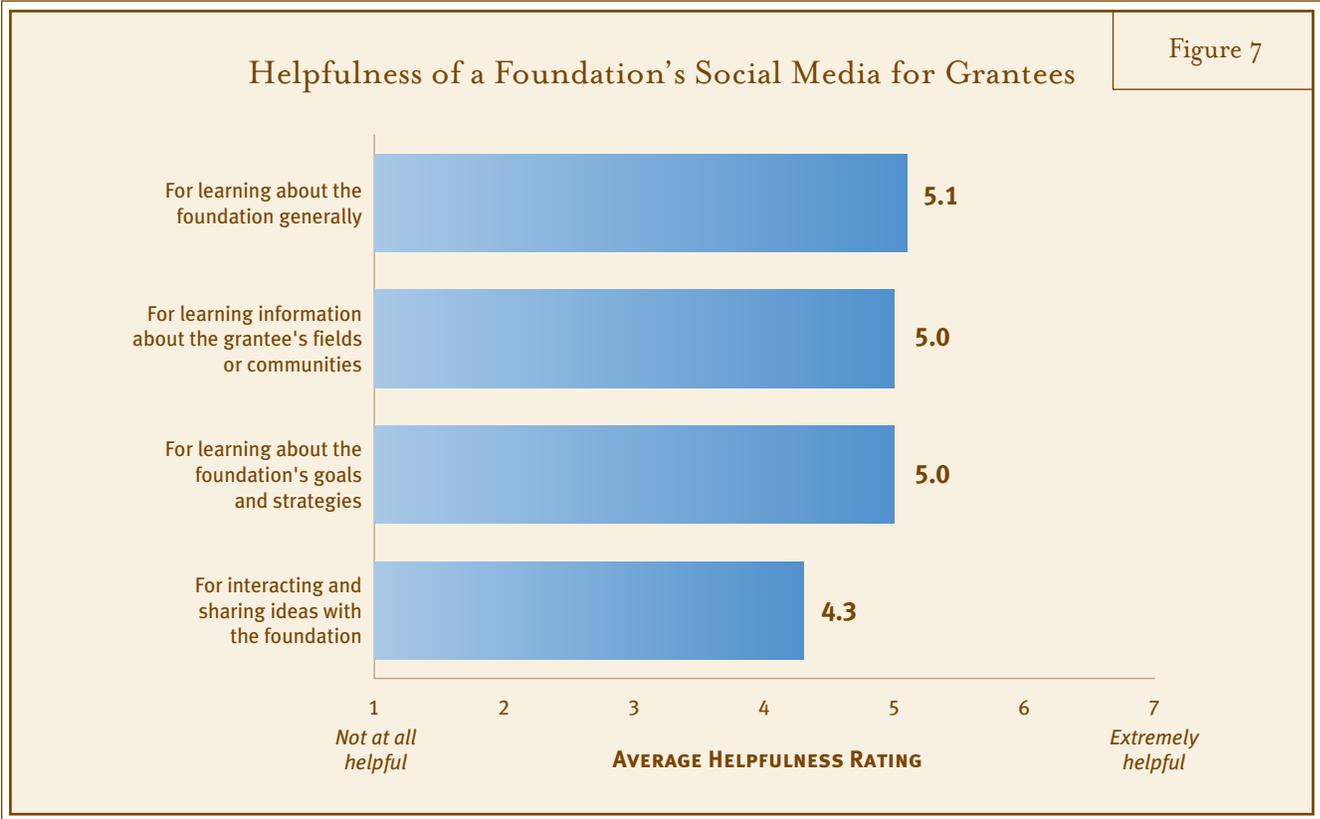
Figure 6

### Helpfulness of Communication Resources for Learning about the Foundation Generally





Other uses for social media, beyond learning about the foundation generally, do not fare any better with respondents when it comes to helpfulness. On average, the helpfulness of social media for interacting and sharing ideas with foundations is one of the least positively rated items by grantees in our entire survey. (See Figure 7.)

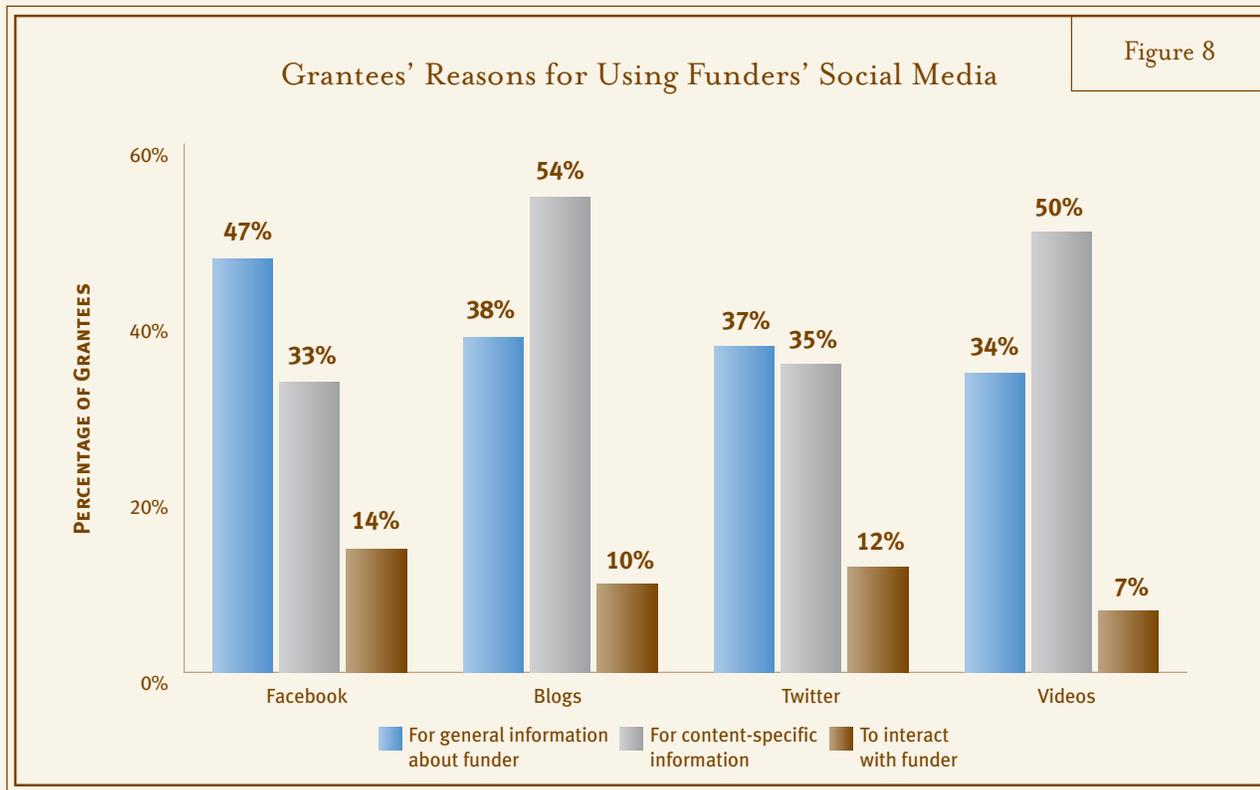


## Why Are Grantees Using Their Foundation Funders' Social Media?

Grantees are primarily using social media created by their funders or their funders' staff for the purpose of gathering information—either general information about the funder or content-specific information.

Few grantees report using social media to interact with their funder. Facebook is most likely to be used to interact, but only 14 percent of the grantees currently accessing their funders' or their funders' staff members' Facebook page cite interacting with their funders as a reason for doing so. (See Figure 8.)

The small percentage of grantees using their funders' social media resources for interacting is somewhat surprising given that the words “interactive” and “networking” are often associated with these communication tools. Our data cannot address why grantees are not using their funders' social media tools in this way, but there appears to be room for deeper engagement between foundations and grantees through social media platforms.



## Conclusion

Social media is increasingly ubiquitous. The majority of foundations are using social media tools in their work, and most nonprofits are using these tools at their own organizations. Yet very few of the grantee respondents to our survey are using social media from their foundation funders or their funders' staff. Those who do are finding foundations' social media less helpful than other communication resources.

There is some evidence that foundation leaders are unsure of the utility of social media. In a 2010 survey of foundation CEOs, the Foundation Center found that only half believed social media had been at least somewhat useful in furthering the work of their foundations. The study concluded that foundation leaders are optimistic about the value of social media tools but "are uncertain how best to use them to further the work of their own foundations."<sup>8</sup>

Jim Canales, president and CEO of the James Irvine Foundation, who is among the more active foundation leaders on Twitter, said he will know the foundation's efforts using social media have been "worth it" when the foundation can "point to ways where social media helped Irvine to have greater impact toward [its] program goals."<sup>9</sup> This bar seems like the right one to assess the investments of time and money being made in social media by foundations. Clearing that bar does not necessarily require that grantees use foundations' social media or value it: It is possible that foundations are influencing other key audiences in ways that further their program goals. Yet for many grantmaking foundations, reaching grantees appears to be an important objective when it comes to social media. Furthermore, if the grantees that a foundation funds are not using these resources, it raises the question of whether it's realistic to think that those with less direct ties to the foundation are, either.

It is also possible that we will see increasing use of these resources by grantees—that our data capture a moment in time that is still early. Perhaps those in our survey population are just warming up to the idea of interacting with their foundation funders in this way. Time will tell. In the meantime, these results should at least provoke some reflection on the part of foundations about the utility of social media when it comes to their interactions and relationships with their grantees.

### Questions for Foundation Leaders about Using Social Media

Social media tools are only as effective as their purpose is clear. Foundations looking to invest time and money in a social media presence might be well-served to consider the following questions:

- » For what purpose(s) does your foundation use social media? How do social media tools add to your foundation's existing communication resources and outreach?
- » Who are your audiences? Grantees? Policymakers? Field leaders? Community leaders? How are these audiences prioritized?
- » How does social media fit into your foundation's strategy to achieve its goals?
- » Are your foundation's efforts to use social media worth the resources being dedicated to these tools? On what basis would you make this decision?

<sup>8</sup> Foundation Center, "Are Foundation Leaders Using Social Media?" (September 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Lucy Bernholz, "Why Would a Foundation Tweet?" *Philanthropy* 2173 blog (February 2011).

## APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

Two separate data collection efforts were undertaken for this study: a survey of grantees and independent data collection by CEP staff of publicly available information on social media usage by foundations.

### Survey of Grantees

The grantee data discussed in this report were gathered through confidential surveys administered between the spring and fall of 2011. These surveys were administered as part of CEP's Grantee Perception Report® (GPR) process. When a foundation commissions a GPR to understand how its grantees perceive it, we send a survey to the grantee staff member whom the foundation tells us is its primary contact.

### Sample

Thirty-four foundations commissioned a GPR between the spring and fall of 2011. In total, 10,316 grantees of these 34 foundations were surveyed, and 6,838 grantees responded, resulting in a 66 percent response rate. One foundation requested that we not survey its grantees about the foundation's use of social media, and two foundations only asked a portion of the social media question module. Of those grantees that responded, 40 percent had the title of executive director or CEO, 20 percent were program directors, and 14 percent held other senior management positions.

### Method

Grantees responded to over 50 survey items, many of which were rated on seven-point Likert rating scales; other items contained categorical response options. The survey also included three open-ended items. The survey was administered online, and grantees were given the option to respond anonymously. The survey questions explored many dimensions of foundation performance, ranging from relationships with grantees to perceptions of foundation impact on the grantee organization.

The survey sought data from grantees about their organization's use of social media and their usage, as well as the helpfulness, of social media created by their foundation funder or its staff, specifically asking about blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and video sharing (e.g., YouTube).

### Quantitative Analyses

To analyze the data, a combination of t-tests, chi-square analyses, correlations, and analysis of variance tests was used. Paired samples t-tests were conducted to understand differences in helpfulness ratings between social media and other communication resources. The number of grantees included in each paired t-test varied, from as low as 378 grantees in the comparison of helpfulness ratings between "group meetings" and "social media" to as high as 820 grantees in the comparison of helpfulness ratings between "websites" and "social media." An alpha level of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance. Effect sizes were examined for all analyses, and only those of at least a medium effect size were reported in this paper.

### Data Collection on Foundation Social Media

For each of the 34 foundations represented in our dataset, we conducted a search for an organizational account or postings for each of the four social media tools using the foundation's website, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Vimeo, and Google. To ensure grantees that were surveyed could have used these accounts by the time they completed our survey, timestamps were checked for each resource. For 10 of the 34 foundations, organizational accounts or postings were not available for any of the social media tools examined. Nine foundations were using all four of these social media tools. Our process did not include searching for the social media accounts of individual foundation staff members.

The frequency of a funder's use of social media was determined by counting the number of blog posts, tweets, Facebook status updates, and video posts a funder made during the three-month period before the close of its grantee survey period.

## Acknowledgements

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