Non-Profit Environmental Organizations and Social Media: Goals, Success, and Space from the Communicator's Perspective

by

Brynn Fromknecht

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ABSTRACT

NON-PROFIT ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA:
GOALS, SUCCESS, AND SPACE FROM THE COMMUNICATOR’S PERSPECTIVE

Brynn Fromknecht
University of Guelph, 2018
Advisor(s):
Dr. Roberta Hawkins
Dr. John Smithers

Advances in Web 2.0 technology have allowed social media channels to emerge as complex instruments of communication and political tools with considerable discursive power. However, a number of questions regarding social media’s effectiveness, value, and relationship to the environment remain unanswered. In the US, non-profit environmental organizations have high social media adoption rates, as well as the ability to influence public opinion with regards to local and global ecosystems. Although these organizations are frequently cited in research regarding social movements, representations of nature, and the economic and civic benefits of social media, little research has engaged with the motivations, goals, or perceptions of the organizations themselves. Using semi-structured interviews to explore how environmental organizations conceptualize, plan, use, and evaluate social media, this thesis approaches the online communications of non-profit environmental actors from the communicator’s perspective in order to better understand the relationship(s) between social media, non-profit organizations, and the environment.
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1 Introduction

By the end of 2017, an estimated 48% of the world’s population, or nearly one in every two people, was using the internet (International Telecommunication Union 2017). This number has increased dramatically since 2000, when only 400 million internet users, just over a tenth of the current figure, were reported worldwide (International Telecommunication Union 2015). Today, two-thirds of households in the Americas have home internet access (International Telecommunication Union 2017), and in the United States, which boasts some of the highest rates of internet use in the world, roughly nine in ten American adults are online (Pew Internet Research 2018b). The rise in internet adoption rates over the past two decades has allowed for greater access to information, supported social and economic development, and provided new avenues for users to engage with one another online.

One of the most popular and distinctive methods of online communication today is social media. In the United States, nearly seven in ten Americans (69%) now use social media channels¹ such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram in order to create and share information, entertain themselves, consume news, engage with politics, and maintain social ties (Perrin 2015; Pew Research Center 2018a). As more of our daily activities and interactions move online, concerns regarding the effects of internet use on the individual, community, and global scale are becoming increasingly urgent (Beer and

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¹ Social media channels may sometimes be referred to as social media sites or platforms in other works. For the purposes of this research, the term social media channels will be used to describe any web-based user interface which allows its members to construct a profile, create content, and communicate with other users, similarly to Boyd and Ellison’s definition (Boyd and Ellison 2007, 210). Though this research does primarily involve the social media channels of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube these are by no means the only social media channels available to internet users.
Burrows 2013). As Mark Graham (2008) has argued, the internet is now widely considered “to represent not just a new form of communication, but instead a new organizational form’ of society” (Graham 2008, 771–772; in Kinsley 2013a).

Accordingly, research into online spaces, activities, and communications has increased substantially over the past several years, often across diverse academic fields (Corner 2013). In the field of communications geography specifically, much of the recent research has focused on understanding how shifts from offline to online communications may alter the scale, composition and accessibility of traditional networks, reshape existing processes of political and social engagement, or transform the material landscape (Adams 2010). However, many questions regarding this new form of communication and advocacy remain. As Kinsley (2013a) has pointed out, the virtual world has now become so ingrained in both our daily lived experiences and our research, that human geographers researching “any particular group or people or state of affairs will, at some point, encounter online activities” (540).

The virtual world is, after all, not limited to personal use, nor are its influences on society, culture, or technology only studied at the individual level. For example, in addition to personal use, social media channels allow for public, private, news, for-profit and non-profit organizations, government bureaus, civic and community organizations, and many other actors of diverse sizes and objectives to create, navigate, and communicate in online spaces in much the same manner as individual users. Although these collective social media users may engage with the same virtual tools as individual
users to connect with, create, and disseminate information, their methods and goals for communicating with audiences may differ greatly from those of individual users. As a result, the activities and objectives associated with collective users such as businesses, institutions, and organizations have contributed to the growing number of debates regarding the impacts of online communications on society, economies, social networks, and landscapes (Adams 2010; Büscher 2013; McLean and Maalsen 2013; Zavattaro and Sementelli 2014). Several of the key debates surrounding online spaces, communications, and social interactions were influential in the framing of this thesis. These debates include: (1) What is the spatiality of the internet? How should we conceptualize it as geographers? (2) How do we measure value of internet use? (3) How does online activity translate to real-life action and activism (or not)? (4) How does online representation interact with and influence the environment? These debates and questions will be discussed more fully in the following chapter.

Much of the current research regarding the social media practices of collective users has focused on its relationships to modern cultural or political trends, social movements, or activism. In recent years, studies in the field of human geography have explored the links between social media users and urban space (AlSayyad and Guvenc 2013; Boy and Uitermark 2016; Tayebi 2013), conservation and land management (Büscher 2013; Büscher 2014; Lunstrum 2017), and advocacy and governance (Auger 2013; Zavattaro and Sementelli 2014; Vicente and Novo 2014). Others have detailed the unique characteristics of online experiences, communities, and networks (McLean and Maalsen 2013; Papacharissi 2009), debated the need for distinctive studies of
‘virtual geography’, ‘digital humanities’, ‘digital society’ or ‘digital culture’ (Adams and Jansson 2012; Batty 1997; Corner 2013), or emphasized the embeddedness of virtual and material activities and landscapes (Kellerman 2016; Kinsley 2013b; Rye 2013).

Meanwhile, perceptions of social media’s overall efficacy as a tool for activism or as a vehicle for social change have varied between case studies, and the merits of online activism, sometimes skeptically referred to as “slacktivism” or “armchair activism,” are still debated by cultural critics and scholars today (Shirky 2011). In the case of the social media use in the private sector, there has been a high level of interest in determining the market value of online communications over the past several years, despite the fact that there is no widely accepted model available to measure the financial benefits of social media, and it remains to be seen if such a calculation is even possible (Fisher 2009). Still, the majority of research in this area has highlighted social media’s potential as a marketing and branding tool that can be utilized to support the sales process, market products and services to consumers, increase profits, and build brand identities (Fisher 2009). Much of this research has focused on direct-to-consumer marketing methods and calculating the ROI (return-on-investment) of social media participation, content, and audiences (Kumar and Mirchandani 2012).

Non-profit organizations represent a unique position with regards to value, social good, and social media, as they operate differently from private corporations and activist groups, but may share elements of both with regards to their activity online (Büscher 2017). Unfortunately, there is less information available on the perspectives, methods,
and goals of non-profit organizations currently operating in online spaces than either internet activism or for-profit businesses, excepting those individual case studies which overlap with individual online social movements, civic engagement projects, or efforts to apply for-profit marketing strategies to non-profit fundraising ventures. This relative lack of information holds a special significance for geographers in the case of non-profit environmental organizations, which have high rates of social media participation as well as strong attachments to offline, physical landscapes (Büscher 2017). For example, non-profit environmental organizations and their representatives have the ability to influence public opinion with regards to local and global ecosystems, and can have a direct hand in the protection or preservation of physical landscapes (Auger 2013; Büscher 2013). This is especially true in the United States, where tax-exempt (or non-profit) organizations are considered a part of civil society, or the ‘third sector’ (Lohmann 1992 in Auger 2013).

Additionally, non-profit environmental organizations are frequently involved in creating and sharing representations of both the environment and environmental issues through digital images and messaging, and these representations can have a direct influence on our perceptions, interactions, and experiences with nature (Büscher 2013). This concept, coined ‘nature 2.0’ by Bram Büscher, will be discussed further in the following chapter. However, it should be noted that despite the fact that non-profit environmental organizations have the power to influence our human-nature relationships through the use of their online messaging (Büscher 2017), much less research has been directed at understanding the motivations, processes, or
perspectives of these actors themselves (Nah and Saxton 2013). Without this information, our knowledge of social media and its content, production, distribution, and consumption online is incomplete, and may fail to accurately represent its potential for community and political engagement, activism, or social change that ultimately effects offline material spaces. Therefore, in order to better comprehend the relationship(s) between social media, non-profit organizations, and the environment, this research will approach the online communications of non-profit environmental actors from the communicator’s perspective.

The aim of this thesis is to examine how non-profit environmental organizations use social media and to what effect. In order to meet this aim, the thesis addresses the following research questions:

1. How do representatives of non-profit environmental organizations use social media to advance their goals?
2. How do representatives of non-profit environmental organizations conceptualize success in social media?
3. How do representatives of non-profit environmental organizations perceive the spatiality of social media?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants from 34 non-profit environmental organizations in order to explore the goals, metrics for success, and perceptions of social media from the perspectives of those engaging in digital labor on behalf of non-profit environmental organizations. I
asked research participants a series of open-ended questions regarding their participation, goals, definitions for success in relation to social media, and perception of social media as it relates to their organization. I also collected the social media content of each organization from each social media channel used in order to provide context for the research and frame lines of inquiry.

The thesis is presented in six chapters. The second chapter contains an overview of internet geography and features contemporary perspectives on the internet’s relationship to place. The chapter also includes an examination of online activism through the medium of social media and a description of the study of non-profit organizations which highlights their potential as environmental actors. The third chapter of the thesis describes the methods of research and analysis used to direct, inform, and respond to the research questions. In the fourth chapter, the findings of the research are presented. The fifth chapter discusses the research findings in relation to the existing literature on non-profit organizations, social media, and online activism. The sixth chapter offers a conclusion for the thesis, presents the scholarly contributions of the research, reflects on its limitations, and discusses the potential for the future study of the use of social media by environmental actors.
2 Literature Review

This section will present an overview of the development of the internet, outline contemporary trends and technologies, and describe current perspectives and debates regarding virtual and material spaces, systems and measurements of value, online activism, and the environment.

2.1 The Internet: Development, Current Trends, and Technologies

The story of the internet begins in academia. The grandfather of the modern internet, ARPANET (The Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), was designed to transmit research data between a network of universities. The first message, sent from UCLA to the Stanford Research Institute in 1969, was meant to read “login,” but this test run was ultimately a failure. Luckily, communications between university computers eventually improved, which allowed researchers to collaborate and share data faster and more efficiently than ever before. Despite the fact that these early ARPANET communications predate the internet we recognize by decades, the same principle of connecting “networks of networks” would later provide the foundation for CERN (The European Organization for Nuclear Research) computer-scientist Tim Berners-Lee to build and support a revolutionary information system in 1989 called the World Wide Web. Berners-Lee’s “web” relied on the construction of websites (or “web documents”) and hypertext, a new software language which linked web documents together. This “web-based” technology allowed users to connect with, share, and access material that was stored on servers and accessible via the internet, rather than saved on an individual’s computer. Berners-Lee’s web also supported search-functions to identify,
sort, and connect relevant data, offering a host of new experiences and opportunities to those who had relied on closed computer-to-computer communications portals such as ARPANET.

The final, perhaps most notable change brought about by Berners-Lee’s web had less to do with advances in technology and more to do with the society in which it emerged. Without a doubt, the web made the internet available to a much wider audience than had ever been possible without it, expanding the user-base from an estimated 500,000 Internet users in 1988 (Gellman, 1988.), to 41% of all American adults, or nearly 84 million people, only a decade later (Pew Research 1999 in Pew Research 2015). In 2018, 89% of all U.S. adults, over 224 million people, were using the internet, a number even higher than the entire adult population of 1998 (Pew Research 2018b). Internet usage remains on the rise globally, and with much more rapid rates of adoption than ever before (International Telecommunication Union 2016). In 2017, 4.02 billion people, or 53% of the global population, were online, with an estimated quarter of a billion online for the first time (International Telecommunication Union 2018). This number has increased dramatically since 2000, when only 400 million internet users were reported worldwide, less than a tenth of the current figure (International Telecommunication Union 2015).

However, the internet now browsed by billions is not the Internet of the 1990s, and the web created by Berners-Lee has experienced at least as many changes to its performance, structure, and uses since its inception in 1989 as ARPANET did in the twenty years before. The average internet user now spends roughly six hours each day
using internet-powered devices and services (Global Web Index 2018), and the modern internet provides a variety of services for individuals, communities, governments, groups, businesses, and organizations (International Telecommunications Union 2018). Considering the internet’s already high usage and rapidly increasing adoption rates alongside its many applications, online spaces and their activities have drawn the attention of researchers across disciplines in the past several years. However, most of this research focuses not on the web created by Berners-Lee, but on one or more facets of the modern internet, a global communications network that has been adapted to better fit the needs of its increasingly diverse users. The following sections will provide an overview of some of the modern internet’s most frequently discussed contemporary applications and describe its relationship to current geographic research.

2.1.1 Web 2.0

In less than three decades, the internet has been transformed from a simple research tool into a robust research area of its own accord. Academic literature and cultural commentators have remarked upon the vast differences between Berners-Lee’s early information “web” and the many technologies, interfaces, activities, spaces, and experiences we expect from the internet today. The contemporary web is generally referred to as “web 2.0,” a term which indicates the clear break between early days of the internet and our contemporary experiences with it (Anderson 2007). For example, although the “web 1.0” of the 1990s allowed for the development of new technologies, expanded communications networks, and offered itself to a variety of applications, the relationship between the web, the user, and the information provided was largely one-
directional (Anderson 2007). Web 1.0 can be best identified by the creation of websites, which were constructed by an administrator and then received by an audience when they visited the site (Anderson 2007). While Web 1.0 did function as a delivery system for searchable content (Berthon et al. 2012), it could not entirely be considered a communications network because it did not allow for a two-way exchange of information or ideas (O’Reilly 2005).

However, following the “dot-com-bubble” of the late 1990s, several adaptations were made to the internet targeting its design, function, and interfaces, such as the addition of blogs, wikis, and social media platforms which supported and encouraged two-way communication between audiences and administrators, as well as between audiences and audiences. This focus on user-sourced, community-generated content is the defining element of web 2.0 (O’Reilly 2005). For example, while the one-directional website-based communication indicative of web 1.0 supplied users with information, collaborative web 2.0 communications encourage or even require users to share information. To illustrate, instead of websites offering audiences general information on tourism (web 1.0), sites like TripAdvisor.com ask an audience of tourists to describe, rate, and rank their personal experiences in the locations they have visited in order to provide content to fellow site visitors (web 2.0). This distinction is important because its focus on increased participation, user experiences, and user contributions led to a new era in web-based communications, marketing, and internet culture which significantly changed the types of communications, services, applications, and activities available in online spaces (Anderson 2007).
Web 2.0 communications and technologies have been studied by a range of academic fields seeking to understand the behavior, interactions, power dynamics, and other relationships which either occur online or are influenced by digital technologies (Corner 2013). Key questions and debates associated with these activities, relationships, and experiences will be covered in subsequent sections, but before engaging with these topics it is necessary to describe the online spaces where much of this research is practiced, observed, or situated. In the following section, I will introduce social media, the online space which is most relevant to the study of collective virtual communications and this research.

2.1.2 Social Media

The web-based communications networks known as social media channels are arguably one of the most visible and easily identifiable aspects of web 2.0 as they rely solely on the participation, experiences, and contributions of users. Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social media channels as a collection of user interfaces, apps, and services that “allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd and Ellison 2007, 211). This definition is useful because it identifies the ways that social media channels differ from other online services, websites, and user experiences typical of the web 1.0 era. It similarly draws attention to the manner in which social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube (as well as others), encourage and provide a means to create and
disseminate user-generated content directly to an audience of fellow users (Meek 2012). For example, a Facebook page allows users share text, photos, and videos directly with an audience of fellow users, who can then share, modify, or respond to that content, but Facebook is not the author of the content itself. Despite the fact that the methods of communication may vary from platform to platform, and the popularity of the channel itself may fluctuate according to user age, location, language, or other variables (Boyd and Ellison 2007), all social media can be identified by this common technological infrastructure which supports and promotes creating, sharing, and interacting with user content (Boyd and Ellison 2007).

2.1.2.1 Social Media Audiences: Users and Uses of Social Media Platforms

This section will offer some broad characterization(s) of both social media users and the types of content/engagement they have been found to commonly produce in order to contribute some background and context for the research. Statistically speaking, most of us identify as social media users. Seventy-one percent of all internet users engage with social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram in order to create and share information, consume news, engage with politics, civic life, entertain themselves, and maintain social ties (Perrin 2015; Pew Research 2018a). In the United States, where internet adoption rates are highest (89%), 69% of all adults reported using social media (Pew Research 2018a). Americans also use multiple social media channels. Roughly three-quarters of the public (73%) use more than one social media channel, and the typical American can be found on three social media channels (Pew Research
The frequency of social media use is also on the rise, as roughly three-quarters (74%) of Facebook users visited the site daily in 2018, 51% of whom reported visiting several times a day (Pew Research 2018a). Historically, Facebook has been the most dominant social media channel and was used by 68% of U.S. internet users in 2018, followed by Instagram (35%), Pinterest (29%), LinkedIn (25%), and Twitter (24%) (Pew Research 2018a). For a complete list of the social media channels used or discussed by participant organizations during this research project, see Appendix 1. Additional information on leading social media channels and their users will also be provided in section 3.1.2.

Although social media users have thus far been characterized as a single, cohesive audience, it is important to note that social media users are not a uniform population. Differences in user age, gender, income, race, ethnicity, and location present a diverse audience of social media users in the U.S. For instance, although social media use remains highest amongst younger populations, older adults have joined social media platforms in increasing numbers over recent years (Pew Research 2018b). The most likely age group to engage with social media is 18-29 (88%), followed by those aged 30-49 (78%), 50-64 (64%), and those aged 65 and over (37%), although social media use has increased across all age groups in recent years (Pew Research 2018b). Additionally, women have led in U.S. social media adoption since 2009, though more than 50% of both genders have reported using social media since 2011, with 73% of all women and 63% of all men reporting social media use in 2018 (Pew Research 2018b). The largest remaining “digital divide,” or observable discrepancy between
online access and online audiences, related to the physical location of the respondents. Americans living in rural areas (59%) have consistently been underrepresented in social media audiences when compared to those living in urban (75%) or suburban (69%) areas (Pew Research 2018a).

Age, gender, education, and location also appear to influence which social media channels users adopt, decisions which may ultimately shape how they behave, communicate, share, interact with, and receive information online. For example, women are more likely to use Pinterest than men (41% of all online women compared to 16% of men), and Instagram has long been considered a popular social media channel by urban populations (42%), but is a less attractive option for those living in rural areas (25%) (Pew Research 2018a). Differences in platform preferences such as these indicate that the internet is not a place where all experiences, activities, and audiences are the same. Instead, researchers from public and private sectors have pointed out that both the demographics and offered services of social media platforms have the potential to influence how communications, transactions, and behaviors take place online, as well as how their audiences interact with the space(s) and one another. While the demographics of social media users are not the specific focus of this research, the observed or expected differences between social media audiences, their online activities, and disparate abilities to access information are crucial issues for researchers to investigate and discuss, especially with regards to the potential social, political, and environmental effects of their participation in the “offline” world.
2.1.2.2 Organizations and Social Media

Social media platforms are not used exclusively by individuals, nor is all academic literature focused solely on the content created, shared, and promoted by personal users. Governments, corporations, community groups, small businesses, universities, and civic, political, and non-profit organizations are just a selection of the many types of groups, industries, and communities currently using social media to reach online audiences. Non-profit organizations, the focus of this research, have flocked online in large numbers, often using social media platforms to streamline management functions, interact with volunteers and donors, educate the public about their programs and services, and build relationships with stakeholders (Waters et al. 2009). For-profit organizations often share many of these goals, along with reaching key demographics, growing profits, and disseminating and tracking information, although their use of this information may vary (Bennett 2012). However, unlike private organizations and individuals, non-profit organizations differ in that they rely on the public for donations, volunteers, and public support in order to operate (Auger 2013).

The social media communications of non-profits have also been of special interest to researchers interested in social media’s role in relationship building (Briones et al. 2011), the democratization of ideas (Auger 2013), and the positive experiences of organizations who engage with Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs (Yang and Kang 2009). However, organizations have also often been criticized for failing to take full advantage of the opportunities presented by social media platforms which often benefit for-profit companies (Kent et al. 2003; Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip 2014; Waters and Jamal
Whereas the private sector has seen social media as an increasingly important tool for increasing profitability and brand awareness, many researchers have found that the non-profit sector is often more skeptical about social media’s ability to advance organizational goals (Hill and White 2000). Waters et al. (2009), related that the primary reasoning behind such skepticism on the part of practitioners could be attributed to the rapidity with which social media has been adopted by non-profit organizations and society at large. For instance, despite the popularity of social media and the potential advantages for organizations, there are few resources available to guide non-profits on how to use social media (Waters et al. 2009). Thus, organizations must learn to use social media to advance their goals through experience, which can be a considerable effort for organizations with already limited resources or time, and can lead to their not taking advantage of the interactive options presented by social media sites. For example, while the organizations in the Waters et al. 2009 study posted external links of news stories, photographs, and discussion board posts, and collected emails, they rarely posted multimedia files, press releases, summaries of their campaigns, or shared information collected by supporters. By failing to do so, these non-profits missed key opportunities to involve social media audiences in organizational activities and social networking (Waters et al. 2009).

Additionally, although research has shown that organizations recognize the importance of participation in social media, they have also identified a number of constraints imposed by the 24/7 availability of Web 2.0 platforms, such as increased time commitments to public relations duties and content production (Büscher 2016).
Other case studies have pointed to an inability to successfully integrate organizational goals, news, project information, campaigns, or volunteer requests into content, despite the availability of several applications within social media platforms designed specifically for non-profit engagement and fundraising, though some have pointed to a lack of time, funding, knowledge and resources available to organizations as the prime culprit for their inability to fully engage with social media applications (Waters et al. 2009).

Questions and differences such as those above reveal that, as with social media generally, there is still much to be learned about the newly formed or changing relationships between non-profit organizations and social media platforms. Indeed, numerous fields of scholarship and within the technology sector itself have continued to call for research into the relationships, uses, and effects of such online participation on non-profit organizations and their audiences (Briones et al. 2011; Büscher 2016; Waters et al. 2009; Youmans and York 2012).

2.2 Understanding the Internet: Contemporary Questions and Debates

From the earliest days of ARPANET to modern social media practices, the entire history of the internet spans less than fifty years. However, the networks, communications, and information made available by these technologies has been readily accessible to individual users for less than thirty. In such a short time, it is impossible to fully understand how these developments and new technologies have impacted communications, communities, commerce, the physical landscape, the environment, or society. It has also been difficult for academic disciplines to position the internet within
their existing ontologies, epistemologies, and methodological approaches (Corner 2013). Geography, a field which encourages the appreciation and analysis of the dynamics of space, place, time, and scale, is well-placed to examine the internet’s relationship to space, and identify its effects on communities and physical landscapes (Agnew 2011). However, while the short timeline of the internet has been filled with technological advancements and modifications, academic disciplines and the demands of research also need time for adaptation and analysis. As a result, many crucial questions as to the nature, structure, and framework of the internet and its technologies remain unanswered, and additional debates regarding their roles, influences, and impacts continue to intrigue researchers (Büscher and Igoe 2013; Fisher 2009). A selection of those debates most relevant to this research will be presented in the following sections: (1) what is internet ‘space’? (2) what is the value of social media? (3) how successful is social media activism? and (4) how does social media influence the framing of non-profit organization (NPO) issues?

2.2.1 What is Internet ‘Space’?
Despite geographers’ early interest in the subject, vast differences in opinion as to what defines or constitutes a virtual space still exist within the discipline. The initial separation occurs when we address the question of what we are talking about when we talk about virtual space. The concepts of space and place are at the foundation of all forms of geographic inquiry, which is, by definition, a spatial science. However, this does not mean that all geographers utilize space or place in the same way, or that geography as a discipline has decided upon a single, all-encompassing definition for either. According
to Agnew (2011, 318-319), in the simplest terms, the concept of place is often used to indicate the specific while space may be perceived as general. Although this description of the differences between space and place is simplistic, it does accurately represent a general separation of space and place within the field of geography. In much of modern geographic literature, *place* is used to refer to specific nodes within space, such as *locations* where things happen, *locales* or settings where activities take place, or even a *sense of place* that is identified as a unique community, landscape, or moral order (Agnew 2011). In contrast, *space* may refer to the evidence of activity within or across itself, note the absence of it entirely, or contain various measurements of scale meant to define hierarchies of place. For example, whereas places are frequently viewed as the physical locations where things happen, the concept of space is becoming more frequently attached to contemporary discussions of *placelessness* or the absence of physicality.

In this modern incarnation, the concept of *space* has sometimes been used to imply that our daily lives and lived experiences are increasingly detached from fixed places and devolving into abstract space (Agnew 2011). This is especially true of scholarship regarding *cyberspace*, new technologies, and the virtual spaces, activities, and interactions, which take place between and within them. These modern developments further complicate the issue of *space* and *place* and have sometimes been identified as inherently *placeless* technologies which “undermine the rootedness of a wide range of processes anywhere in particular,” and make places obsolete by conquering space (Agnew 2011, 318). As geography continues to offer competing,
complementary, or compartmentalized definitions of space and place with regards to physical and theoretical contexts, the same can be said of our conceptualization of online spaces and the activities which are supported by them. As Kinsley (2013a) points out, lines are frequently drawn between the ‘virtual world’ and the ‘real world.’ These distinctions serve to effectively separate geographic fields of study for some but form problematic and arbitrary barriers for others. Some have perceived of virtual geography, or geography which focuses on online technologies, environments, interactions, and actors, as little more than an assortment of technological tools and mechanisms that may be used to connect concrete, material geographies to one another by acting as a conduit for data and social interactions which exist in places (Beer and Burrows 2013). Others have argued that virtual geography opens up a new and expansive field of research that exists as an abstraction from material reality and can function as an independent plane of space, time, or scale (Batty 1997; Taylor 1997; Thrift 1996).

Recently, a number of geographers have focused less on the debates between material or immaterial virtual geographies, focusing instead on a loose amalgamation of the two, wherein the material constructs of the virtual world, such as user interfaces, interact with the more abstract dimensions of virtual space to form a third dimension (Beer and Burrows 2013; Graham 2010; Kinsley 2013a). This understanding of virtual geography is grounded in the physical forms and processes of databases and user connectivity networks, but differentiated by the practices with which such material geographies serve to create and enable projects of social production. For example, far from virtual spaces being placeless, Green et al. (2005) argue that these new
technologies, “rather than simply creating a totally new cyberspace world or making place irrelevant,” are in actuality, “new ‘place-making projects’” (Green 2005 quoted in Agnew 2011, 328). These online place-making activities, such as the joining of Facebook groups or participation in Reddit community posts, have created new avenues for negotiating complex social processes within the virtual commons and are neither fixed in place or placeless (Adams 2010; Zavattaro and Sementelli 2014).

According to Adams’ (2010) taxonomy for communications geography, the existing tensions between our perceptions of space and place are furthered by such modern contrasting assumptions regarding (a) “the containment of mediated experiences within real, physical contexts of interaction,” and (b) “the real world as that which is captured, packaged, and transmitted by mediated contexts of interaction” (Adams 2010, 38). In other words, space and place can be further examined as “either the contents of communications or the context of communications” (Adams 2010, 38), but both of these concepts must be examined in greater detail in order to both propose and respond to questions of what texts ‘say’ about places, how position affects connections and flows, how interconnections constitute social spaces of inclusion and exclusion, or “how places accommodate media and media become ingredients in places” (Adams 2010, 50).

In this call to order the diverse body of theoretical and applied research currently being done on communications, space, place, and media, Adams repeatedly addresses the idea that space might be where communication happens, but it is also one of the things created by communications (Adams 2010). Due to the complex nature of these
interactions, as well as the broad interest currently being expressed amongst geographers and other researchers, Adams argues that the conceptual space of media communications should be organized into four quadrants loosely based on Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) *The Production of Space*: (1) places-*in-*media (‘representational spaces’, or ‘the spaces of communication lived directly by artists, writers, and philosophers’); (2) media-*in-*places (a perspective which often focuses on the performative relationships between site, subject, and communication); (3) spaces-*in-*media (representations of space which are abstract, theoretical, and production-oriented spaces involving the formal plans and abstract blueprints of powerful actors whose formalizations of space control actions); and (4) media-*in*-space (which ‘highlights unevenness, drawing attention to digital divides that appear globally between North and South as well as between East and West, at the subnational and even the urban scale’) (Lefebvre 1991 in Adams 2010, 39).

As Adams and others have indicated, Geography is well placed to examine the complex relationships between space, place, scale, virtual communications, experiences, and hierarchies of power. In support of this idea, Adams and Jansson (2012) indicate that the discipline of geography contains the “theoretical keys to understanding the complexity of space, which in today’s mediatized world is taking on an oddly fragmented, multiplied, and layered character,” but identify the need for both additional research and theoretical inquiry into these key areas (Adams and Jansson 2012, 300). They are certainly not alone in doing so, as the nature of space, place, and cyberspace remain contested by researchers across many fields, though perhaps none
with so much attention to the why, where, or scale as geographers (Agnew 2011). While Adams’ framework is a useful starting point for forming and responding to key questions impacting modern communications, technologies, spaces, and places, the taxonomy he has presented is admittedly only the beginning. In the meantime, the question of how we should conceptualize the spatiality of the internet ultimately remains without a precise answer, though not without direction(s). In order to better understand how geography might contextualize the experiences, spaces, and places of the internet, more research befitting the type of questions posed in Adams’ framework, as well as others, must be completed on both online environments themselves as well as the users (both audiences and authors), networks, and communities, economies, power structures, and scales found within them.

This research attempts to address how non-profit environmental organizations conceptualize “space” as it relates to the internet because these groups not only interact with virtual spaces, but they do so on behalf of material, offline spaces, often creating virtual representations of the environment in order to do so. Additionally, due to the medium of social media channels, the social media audiences of non-profit environmental organizations are global, though they frequently engage with communities at the local level. In order to better understand how virtual spaces and their communications can be contextualized in this instance, this research attempts to discover if those operating within the space interpret its relationship to both material and virtual spaces.
2.2.2 What is the ‘Value’ of Social Media?

Along with questioning the relationships between virtual and material spaces, scholars have debated the value of social media participation for various types of organizations. Advancements in communications technologies have paved the way for the now ubiquitous catchphrase of “harnessing the power of the crowd,” and the ability to successfully secure, hold, and direct the attention of “the crowd” is now frequently pursued, analyzed, and dissected by an array of market researchers, social scientists, and other for-profit and non-profit actors seeking to capture, understand, or explain such a phenomenon (Anderson 2007). In the private sector, social media and social media content have been increasingly commodified as online marketing efforts to reach customers, generate interest in new products, and build brand loyalty have increased in recent years (Kaplan 2012; Kim and Ko 2012). Successful social media marketing campaigns have been described by the businesses as the “most significant drivers of brand loyalty” (Erdoğan and Çiček 2012), and have even been credited with changing the way that businesses think about the market value of a customer (Fisher 2009; Kim and Ko 2012).

Marketing research has continuously supported the claim that customers make purchasing decisions based on information they found through social media applications, and that they are likely to use social media platforms to share such information with others (Kirtiš and Karahan 2011; Kim and Ko 2012). For instance, while a commercial detailing the superior quality of a restaurant chain my spark consumer interest, digital ‘word-of-mouth’ promotions from within an individual’s social network are
a much more effective endorsement (Erdoğan and Çiçek 2012). According to Erdoğan and Çiçek (2012), the relationships between consumers and their digital social ties now have a perceptible market value, as they allow for firms to increase sales revenues, ensure stability, and raise profits over time. However, determining the precise Return-on-Investment (ROI) of social media as an expression of investment to profit continues to be a problem for the private sector, as measuring the influence of social media content created and shared by firms and individuals on consumers is still considered imprecise due to the comparative difficulty of measuring social influence as opposed to simple website-visitor-to-cost ratios (Fisher 2009).

In the non-profit sector, much less research has been conducted regarding the 'value' of social media participation, though the importance of social influence is particularly important for the use of social media by organizations outside of the private sector who are not concerned solely with profits, but also influencing public opinion. The use of social media by non-profit organizations has also increased steadily over the past several years, with similar goals of gathering information, reaching key demographics, growing profits, and disseminating and tracking information, although their goals and uses for social media may differ (Bennett 2012). As the ultimate goal of social media marketing is to create value, it is important to acknowledge that online social networks create both economic and social value, and that the social value of these communications might be of more interest to non-profit organizations than other users (Padilla-Meléndez and del Águila-Obra 2013). For example, unlike for-profit organizations, non-profit organizations have the additional goals of building volunteer
networks and spreading awareness (Auer 2011; Bennet 2012). However, while many examples of social media’s potential for community organizing and social welfare have been used to define success in social media, such as recent social movements in the middle east or humanitarian assistance in Haiti, few of these examples are led by organizational actors themselves (Auer 2011).

Whereas the private sector has seen social media as an increasingly important tool for increasing profitability and brand awareness, researchers have also found that the non-profit sector is more skeptical about social media’s ability to advance organizational goals (Adams and Jansson 2012). Non-profit organizations have also been criticized for failing to take full advantage of the opportunities presented by social media channels (Kent et al. 2003; Waters and Jamal 2011). For example, some studies have pointed to an inability to successfully integrate organizational goals, news, project information, campaigns, or volunteer requests into content, despite the availability of applications within social media channels designed specifically for non-profit engagement and fundraising (Waters et al. 2009). While some have pointed to the difference in time, funding, knowledge, or resources available to a non-profit organization, when contrasted with the private sector (Waters et al. 2009), it is also possible the additional goals of non-profit organizations, such as community organizing or advocacy, may also make social media less, or differently, valuable. This research intends to offer more insight into the types of value non-profit workers place on social media with regards to their organizations. More specifically, it questions whether non-profit workers identify chiefly with the type of market value described in the for-profit
literature that is available, or if their methods of measurement or definitions of value when it comes to social media communications will differ from the private sector.

2.2.3 Is Social Media Activism Successful?

Social media’s relationship to contemporary activism has also been a frequent subject of debate over the past several years. Although not all non-profit organizations engage in activism, most do seek to foster civic engagement, which is an important aspect of both activism and online social movements (Warren, Sulaiman and Jaafar 2014). Social media allows anyone with an interest to participate in an online action related to any number of social, environmental, civic, or other issues from the comfort of their homes, offices, or anywhere else with an internet connection. An individual needs only to log into their social media accounts to participate in online activism or advocacy efforts, such as tweeting to a government official or re-sharing content posted by an organization. These actions are generally aimed at generating public interest and raising awareness in order to produce policy changes or solve an identified social problem, and it has been argued that social media’s ability to facilitate collective action and democratize the media has allowed activist networks to thrive online (Youmans and York 2012; Carroll and Hackett 2006).

For example, a study to explain the processes and perceived performance of Twitter as a tool for activist networks, which share similar goals of civic engagement and raising awareness with non-profit organizations, Penney and Dadas (2013) found that engaging in online activism allowed for social media users to “bridge the gap between online and offline spaces of engagement,” amplify a message and add or respond to
press coverage, express their personal views regarding the movement in the form of editorial commentary, engage in discussion and deliberation with other users regarding the movement, make connections with other activists, and facilitate online-based actions such as petitioning and lobbying (Penney and Dadas 2013). In this study, users cited the ability to interact with other like-minded users as essential for building a sense of community, and Penney and Dadas (2013) point out that much of the literature surrounding social movements indicates perceived social ties have “long been recognized as an integral aspect of building social movements” (McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Penney and Dadas 2013, 83).

Much of the research on social media’s role in online activism has focused on the actions, methods, and goals of online users, and not on the perceptions, actions, methods, or goals of organizations themselves. Although previous studies have shown that virtual tools have frequently been used for publicizing and coordinating online and offline actions, researchers have called for future studies to develop a more effective way to study the impacts of social media, and to determine what promotes online activism (Warren, Sulaiman and Jaafar 2014, 291-292). Additionally, the results of social media activism at either the individual or the organization level are difficult to assess, and many question if online social media activism necessarily translates to offline, real-world action. Critics of online activism have described the practice as a “superficial, minimal effort in support of causes” (Youmans and York 2012, 316), and adopted terms such as ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’ to describe their lackluster user interest and influence (Büscher 2014). Researchers have also found that the non-profit
sector is often more skeptical about social media’s ability to advance organizational or social goals (Waters et al. 2009; Youmans and York 2012). While previous research has addressed the goals of both the private sector and individual users, more attention should be given to the goals and definitions of success that are composed by organizations. This research intends to address these gaps in the existing literature by focusing on the actions, methods, and goals of non-profit organizations when engaging with social media channels.

2.2.4 How Does Social Media Influence the Framing of NPO Issues?
The advent of Web 2.0 technologies such as social media channels has also prompted questions around the framing of civic, social, and environmental issues. The messaging strategies and rhetoric used by non-profit communicators have the ability to reveal or conceal as much about a specific issue as necessary to provide engaging, persuasive, and effective arguments in order to build relationships and achieve organizational goals while presenting the organization in a positive light (Auger 2013). In a study of the social media communications of diametrically opposed non-profit advocacy organizations targeting social issues such as abortion and gun control, Auger (2013) found that the chief role of non-profit communicators’ social media participation was to persuade the audience to the organization’s perspective by way of one-way communication. If, as Auger (2013) argues, the goal of non-profit advocacy organizations is to represent their constituents’ needs to the government, media, and public (Greely 2006 in Auger 2013) through public relations and persuasive speech, the framing of these issues is of paramount importance in the United States, where non-profit organizations are
generally considered the ‘third sector’ of society (Auger 2013), and maintain the ability to influence the protection or preservation of physical landscapes (Büscher 2013). However, despite the popularity of social media research across disciplines, relatively few studies have explored the usage of social media with regards to public relations, and even fewer have focused on the role of the non-profit sector in the creation, management, or dissemination of issue-based messaging (Briones et al. 2011). Greater attention to this might enable an enriched understanding of how non-profit organizations create or change organizational messaging, strategies, or goals based upon the preferences of their audiences, current trends in social media, and other online spaces, activities, and experiences.

Due to the fact that this research looks at environmental non-profit organizations, it is equally important to consider the work being developed on social media use and the internet by those studying human-environment relationships. Environmental non-profit organizations have the capacity to affect offline spaces, the politics and political economies of those spaces, and impact human–nature relationships (Büscher 2014). According to Büscher (2013), stakeholders such as non-profit organizations, institutions, and the private sector routinely present either idealized or problematized depictions of nature in order to appeal to online audiences, often with the goal of generating interest in neoliberal conservation projects. Both private and conservation actors choose communication strategies meant to frame environmental issues in a manner which achieves the goals of their projects, which often necessitates the commodification of nature in order to convey its value to justify the act of conserving or ‘saving’ it (Büscher
Further, this 'nature 2.0', where “Web 2.0 applications... create new virtual forms and manifestations of nature and its conservation that intersect with material natures in complex new ways” (2013, 1), is represented by Büscher (2014) as not only a place where digital images of nature are constructed, but a place where online users become active participants in the creation of these images. This concept of ‘prosumption’, “the apparent blurring of production and consumption that occurs as a consequence of increasing participation of the consumer” (Beer and Burrows 2010, 6), identifies another potential influence on the framing of issues on social media, the co-production of digital natures on behalf of material landscapes and conservation organizations (Büscher and Igoe 2013). According to Büscher (2014), we are only just beginning to examine these relationships and the effects they have on both society and the environment.

2.3 **Summary of Current Literature and Research Gaps**

The foregoing review of the literature reveals that environmental non-profit organizations are engaging with social media at high rates in order to connect with the public. In doing so, they create images of offline spaces and issues that may influence how their audiences perceive and interact with the environment. While researchers have studied how online images and communications have the potential to affect physical landscapes, as well as our experiences and perceptions of them, less research has been completed on the perceptions, influences, or aims of the practitioners themselves. Understanding the aim of the practitioners is important for several reasons, not the least of which is that the use of digital data such as social media presents new
theoretical, methodological, and ethical challenges (Dubois and Ford 2015). Similarly, if the same method of evaluating and responding to for-profit interactions on social media is applied to non-profit actors, it could be possible that the non-profit communications, strategies, and goals of an organization could be adapted to serve the needs and desires of the audience, rather than the goals of the organization itself. Clearly, as rates of internet use and social media adoption continue to rise globally and near saturation in North America, questions of why and how social media influences our behavior both on and offline are increasingly urgent.

While it is important to better understand what the impacts of social media are on their audiences and the environment, the goal of this research is to ascertain why environmental non-profit organizations engage with social media and how their communications are produced. This information is not only useful for researchers interested in the production and dissemination of ideas or communications about the environment, but will be of use to environmental non-profit organizations working in virtual spaces as well. This chapter has introduced social media and discussed several key debates present in the available literature. The following chapter will describe how this research project was conducted.
3 Research Design

The following chapter will discuss the methods used in this research to examine the relationships between environmental non-profit organizations and social media and address the project’s primary research questions: (1) How do environmental non-profit organizations use social media to advance their goals; (2) How do environmental non-profit organizations conceptualize success in social media; and (3) How do environmental non-profit organizations perceive the spatiality of social media? Two data collection methods were used: a data collection and survey of organizational social media channels over a three-month period, and key informant interviews with those responsible for social media communications in the environmental non-profit organizations under study. In order to provide context for the interviews which followed, I collected the social media data of each organization that agreed to participate in the research project. Although this data source certainly could have been analyzed further on its own, its primary purpose for this research project was to provide background information on the organizations participating in the research project and their practices as a means of strengthening and sharpening the lines of inquiry with key informants.

The monitoring and assessment of posted content also aided in the interpretation of key informant data and provided an ability to link general statements from participants with tangible examples from the ongoing activities of participating NPOs. Below I will discuss each in turn, while also defining some of the key terms relevant to social media research. I conclude by explaining the data analysis techniques used to respond to the project’s research questions.
3.1 Survey of Social Media Content

This section will describe the sampling selection for this project, introduce the primary social media channels discussed in this thesis, detail the process by which I collected social media data, and explain how I applied these data to the research.

3.1.1 Selection of Organizations to Include in Sample

This project followed a purposive sampling framework, which enables researchers to select individuals or groups that best represent the characteristics of interest in the total available population. Rather than a random sampling, purposive sampling allows for the selection of knowledgeable, experienced, and information-rich research participants who are best suited to address the project’s research questions (Patton 2001). This sampling method is frequently used to study organizations (Flowerdew and Martin 2005), and allows for the selection of individuals or groups that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest due to their knowledge and experience (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2011), availability and willingness to participate, and their ability to communicate in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner (Bernard 2002; Spradley 1979 in Palinkas et al. 2016). As with many organizational studies, my goal in this instance was to select an illustrative rather than extensive sample of informants. This would allow me to connect with a diverse range of organizations using social media, and gain as much insight as possible into their individual perspectives. In order to follow a homogeneous purposive sampling strategy, I needed to define a shared characteristic, or set of characteristics, to locate potential participants. My first step in developing this sample of organizations was to
narrow the scale at which organizations were selected. Although non-profit environmental organizations engaging with social media are represented in nearly every country, community, and language, I elected to study only those based in the United States due to the relative similarity of their geographic location, scheduling availability, and English language social media content and communication. Non-profit environmental organizations in the United States were also considered to be ideal for this research due to their high rates of social media adoption (Büscher 2017; Waters et al. 2009), which allowed for a greater initial pool of research participants.

In order to locate appropriate non-profit environmental organizations based in the United States, I obtained a list of environmental protection and conservation organizations from Charity Navigator. This list was used to identify potential participant organizations due to the fact that Charity Navigator is an independent non-profit organization which compiles information on officially recognized charitable organizations operating in the United States (although they may be based in other countries or operate internationally), in order to evaluate their financial health, accountability, and transparency. These data are then used to “develop an unbiased, objective, numbers-based rating system” (Charity Navigator 2015a) in an effort to provide information to potential donors. As a result, Charity Navigator has become the United States’ “largest and most-utilized evaluator of charities” (Charity Navigator 2015a).

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2 https://www.charitynavigator.org/
According to Charity Navigator’s criteria, an environmental organization is defined as an organization that “work[s] to preserve and protect the environment and to promote environmental research, conservation and appreciation” (Charity Navigator 2015b). The list is further broken down into “Environmental Protection and Conservation” organizations and “Botanical Gardens, Parks, and Nature Centers” (Charity Navigator 2015b). Due to this research project’s focus on environmental protection and conservation organizations, I removed organizations defined as “Botanical Gardens, Parks, and Nature Centers” from the pool of potential research participants. The remaining 302 organizations listed were then separated into three groups according to their annual budget size in order to ensure that organizations with diverse resources were included in the final sample, which is consistent with a maximum variation purposive sampling framework (Patton 2001).

The first budget group (expenses totaling up to $3.5 million) contained a total of 190 organizations, while the second group (expenses totaling between $3.5 million and $13.5 million) contained 73 organizations, and the third group (expenses totaling $13.5 million and up) contained 29 organizations. Each of these organizations was added to a master spreadsheet in order to assess and record whether or not they had an active social media presence on at least two social media channels. If I was unable to locate at least two social media profiles for an organization on the organization’s home webpage or by searching social media channels themselves, I removed the organization from the list of potential participants. Similarly, any organization whose collective social media accounts had not been updated in the last six weeks was removed from the list, as I did
not consider them to meet the definition of “active” social media users. Active social media accounts of organizations were saved to an online folder. Organizations using Twitter were followed by a Twitter account I created for the research project\(^3\). This profile was used to follow the activity of non-profit environmental organizations active on that social media channel both prior to and after participant organizations were selected for this research project.

In total 273 of 302 (90%) environmental protection and conservation organizations were found to have an active presence on at least two social media channels. After this final list of potential participant organizations was compiled, I chose to contact organizations from the list at random, as all of the organizations shared the same primary characteristics selected for the research. In total, 70 organizations with at least two active social media profiles were contacted with the goal of achieving a representative sample of key informants from each budget group. Overall, 40 organizations were contacted from the first budget group (expenses totaling up to $3.5 million), 20 organizations were contacted from the second group (expenses totaling between $3.5 million and $13.5 million), and 10 organizations were contacted from third group (expenses totaling $13.5 million and up). I considered the number of organizations contacted to be representative because, initially, they represented roughly the same proportions as the list I had compiled of organizations with active social media profiles. However, as I began receiving replies from organizations and scheduling

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\(^3\) The Twitter profile created for this research project can be found at https://twitter.com/natureclicker. Occasionally, the profile was used to contact representatives from prospective participant organizations to arrange for key informant interviews or to share randomly selected organizational posts.
interviews, I realized that the third budget group (expenses totaling $13.5 million and up) would likely be unrepresented or underrepresented in the final total. I originally contacted six organizations from this group, but I found that it was a much lengthier process to locate, contact, and schedule an interview with the individual (or individuals) responsible for their social media accounts. In order to ensure that I was able to schedule interviews with this budget group in time to include them in the research project, I contacted an additional four organizations for a total of ten.

The initial contact request included a link to my online blog⁴, profile, and information regarding my research project and interview process. This research blog, along with the corresponding Twitter account, allowed me to increase the visibility of the project and establish communications with potential participants. At the conclusion of the interview process, a total of 22 organizations from the first budget group were interviewed, 8 from the second, and 4 from the third, which did provide an approximate representation of the three budget groups⁵. My response rate was 48.5%, with 55% of contacted organizations from the first budget group (expenses totaling up to $3.5 million) agreeing to participate, 40% from the second budget group (expenses totaling between $3.5 million and $13.5 million), and 40% from the third budget group (expenses totaling $13.5 million and up), after increasing the number of organizations contacted from six to ten. The primary reason that contacted organizations did not

⁴ https://rightclicknature.wordpress.com/

⁵ 12.1% of participant organizations were categorized as belonging to the first budget group (up to $3.5 million in annual expenditures), 9.6% belonged to the second group (between $3.5 million and $13.5 million in annual expenditures), and 13.8% belonged to the third group (over $13.5 million dollars in annual expenditures).
participate was a lack of response. I had no outright denials to participate, though six representatives declined or were otherwise unable to participate due to scheduling and time constraints.

3.1.2 Social Media Channels and Key Terms

Despite the variety of social media channels available, this project primarily focused on three social media channels; Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Many research participants identified these social media brands as the “big three” channels that were used to represent their organizations and share information. See Appendix 1 for a complete list of the social media channels used or discussed by participant organizations during interviews. This section will briefly introduce the most predominantly cited social media channels in order to describe the digital work sites of key informants and illustrate the manner of data collected and analyzed from organizational social media channels.

Facebook is by far the most popular social media channel in the United States, where 79% of all internet users (68% of all U.S. adults) report using Facebook (Pew Research 2018). Of these users, 74% reported that they access the channel at least once per day (Pew Research 2018). Facebook offers user accounts the opportunity to follow updates from friends, organizations, businesses, or other accounts, create and share their own content, add comments to other user-generated posts, or share their reactions to posts using ‘like’ and ‘share’ options created by Facebook. Facebook content is comprised of individually crafted user posts which are displayed on the profile page of the account holder. Posts may contain text, images, videos, or link to external
content. Users are able to see and interact with content posted from other users and pages that they have elected to “like,” or receive updates from. This content is collected and displayed in a user’s “newsfeed,” a landing page populated with the posts of other users. Facebook users are also able to share the posts of other accounts to their own profiles by visiting the newsfeed stream or the profile page of another user. In the case of Facebook advertising, an account holder may pay to appear on the newsfeeds of users that do not currently follow their updates in an effort to boost the visibility of their post or obtain new followers. Account holders are also able to track the number of views and interactions with posts or advertisements through the application. Advertising features allow businesses and organizations to target Facebook audiences by a wide range of factors including age, gender, ethnicity (U.S. only), location, language, relationship status, connections with other users, income level, occupation, education level, interests, behaviors, and other demographic data collected from user profiles by Facebook. Of the 273 non-profit environmental organizations found to have an active presence on at least two social media channels, all 273 had a Facebook profile.
Figure 1: Image of a Facebook post.

Instagram is the second most popular social media channel amongst American internet users, claiming 35% of all U.S. adults as a user base (Pew Research 2018). A platform distinguished by its focus on images, videos, and mobile devices, Instagram posts must include image or video files uploaded by a mobile device, or through an extension application connected to a mobile device. Like Facebook, there is no character limit for text attached to posts and users encounter content uploaded by other users via a home feed. Individual profile pages display all images and videos uploaded by the user in a grid style gallery. Unlike many other social media channels, linking individual posts to external content is not supported, although paid Instagram
advertisements offer the opportunity to link to either Instagram profiles or external content. Of the 34 final research participants, 25 were active on Instagram.

Figure 2: Image of an Instagram post.

Twitter, used by 24% of U.S. adults, also offers account-based users the opportunity to view and follow updates from pages, groups, organizations, businesses or other users (Pew Research 2018). However, Twitter posts differ from Facebook in that each post must be limited to 140-characters or less\(^6\). Like Facebook, posts may contain images, videos, or links to external content. Users communicate by “tagging” each other in posts and by viewing content posted by accounts they follow in their home feed. Twitter also allows for users to create, follow, and communicate using hashtags, typically short words or phrases preceded by a pound sign (#). “Trending,” or “popular,”

\(^6\) The number of characters available in a tweet was updated from 140 to 280 in November of 2017.
hashtag are typically displayed on a user’s home feed, and may be targeted to the user by location or interests. Twitter “impressions,” or data displaying the number, popularity, and timing of a user’s personal post views, are displayed on the user account profile page. If an account chooses to pay to increase post visibility or interaction, Twitter advertising functions similarly to that of Facebook, allowing for users to be targeted by a number of demographics, including age, gender, location, language, interests, behaviors, keywords, or types of devices used to access Twitter. Of the 34 research participants, all 34 had an organizational Twitter profile.

Figure 3: Image of a Twitter post.

3.1.3 Social Media Data Collection

The first step in the data collection process was to obtain the social media data created by participant organizations and shared to their social media profiles during the
research period. I collected these data (in the form of social media posts), to aid in the development of interview questions, familiarize myself with the style, frequency, and content of participant organizations’ social media profiles, and support my later analysis of research themes. While it is possible to search the entirety of an organization’s posts on a social media channel using a specific hashtag or keyword, the questions prompting my research were more closely related to the day-to-day experiences, perspectives, and actions of environmental non-profit organizations’ social media. Therefore, all of the social media content produced by participant organizations was gathered over a 12-week period beginning June 1, 2015 and ending August 31, 2015. These social media posts were then used to provide background on the participant organizations and their social media practices, as well as inform the key informant interviews which followed.

Due to the fact that social media is both dynamic and time-sensitive, it was necessary to collect data multiple times over the course of the 12-week collection period, rather than on a single occasion before or after its conclusion. For example, although an organization that is active on Twitter might create and share thousands of posts, or “tweets,” in a matter of weeks, only the most recent 3,200 posts to this social media channel are visible on a user’s profile. Similarly, content posted to social media channels may be edited, moderated, deleted, or expounded upon at any time. As changes such as these have the ability to affect the content, context, and perception of an organization’s social media activities, I utilized a web-based application which allows users to save websites as they appeared on the exact dates and times they were visited
in order to collect and preserve the data. This application, Zotero\textsuperscript{7}, was used to capture and secure the images, texts, videos, visible communications, and audience information of each participant organization at least once every four-weeks during the 12-week period they were surveyed. In the case of more active organizations, additional snapshots were taken as necessary to ensure that all of the social media data produced during the 12-week period were collected. I collected these data along this timeline with the intention of tracing the development of social media campaigns, activities, and outreach efforts as they happened. The prolonged method of capturing of social media was important to this research due to the speed at which social media profiles are updated and modified. It also allowed me to remain up-to-date on the mission, goals, and social media practices of the participant organizations. These data provided a baseline context for key informant interviews and assisted with the continuous development of interview questions.

3.1.4 Social Media Survey

In order to prepare for, guide, and analyze key informant interviews, I collected the social media content of all participant organizations in the form of images, text, and network data. I then monitored the Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts of participant organizations throughout the course of the project in order to understand what organizations were posting about, who they were communicating with, how often they were engaging with social media, and what (if any) their stated goals for their

\textsuperscript{7} https://www.zotero.org/
communications were. I also reviewed images and texts produced by the organizations, (such as shared posts, and online communications like comments, tweets, and hashtags), throughout the research process and before each key informant interview. During this time, I kept notes on current issue-specific campaigns, recent posts, the style or structure of those posts, calls to action, and other online activity. I then prepared interview questions related to the posted content and any objectives, management techniques, or attitudes associated with it before each interview based upon recently posted content. This content was also used to inform and expand upon discussions during interviews with the key informants who were often responsible for its production or management. For example, if a key informant referred to a specific hashtag, organizational goal, issue-specific campaign, or visual, I was then able to view the associated collection of posts or images while the interview continued, which frequently led to additional follow-up questions and conversation regarding the indicated content.

3.2 Key Informant Interviews

The second, and more centrally vital, set of data collected in order to direct and inform the research project were key informant interviews with non-profit environmental organization staff members (and volunteers) working in social media on behalf of participant organizations. A “key informant” is an individual that is knowledgeable about a particular issue, organization, or program, and may serve as a proxy for their organization or group (Lavrakas 2008). Due to the fact that key informants are non-random, in-depth interviews provide detailed information on the goals, activities, and attitudes of the organizations they represent (Lavrakas 2008). For this project, key
informants included staff members of non-profit environmental organizations who were directly involved in the planning, implementation, or management of their organization’s social media presence. A semi-structured method was used because semi-structured interviews offer research participants the opportunity to explore issues that “they feel are important” (Longhurst 2010, 103), and allow researchers to gather a broad range of rich and detailed information (Valentine in Flowerdew and Martin 2005, 111). This section will discuss how I selected and interviewed key informants, as well as how I analyzed interview data in order to respond to the stated research questions.

3.2.1 Participant Organizations and Key Informants

In total, 38 staff members working with social media on behalf of 34 environmental non-profit organizations operating in the United States were contacted, agreed to participate in the research project, and were interviewed8. For the purpose of this research, key informants were defined as any organizational staff member (or volunteer) currently engaging in social media work on behalf of a non-profit environmental organization in the United States. Although each key informant was designated with at least one aspect of the planning, posting, management, or maintenance of their organization’s social media accounts, a variety of job titles, job descriptions, and backgrounds were represented. The majority of interview participants worked in communications departments, where job titles included five Communications Directors, five Communications Managers, and three Communications Assistants (or associates).

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8 38 interviews were eventually conducted out of the 70 initial contacts with non-profit environmental organizations considered active on social media. Organizations were contacted randomly from each budget group and scheduled for interviews at their convenience. For more on participant organizations and their representatives, see Appendix 2.
Other job titles represented covered various departments and responsibilities common to non-profit organizations, such as marketing, management, community engagement, projects coordination, development, or grant management. A smaller number of key informants defined their positions as writers, digital content strategists, or engagement coordinators.

Most interview participants described communications as their primary role within their organization. Digital communications including social media, website management, and email communications were frequently included within descriptions of work responsibilities, although the positions and tasks delegated to participants varied between organizations. Other duties mentioned included producing and editing offline communications documents and press releases, grants management, special events coordinating, volunteer management, or leading tour groups. Nearly a quarter of interview participants reported working with social media in conjunction with journalism prior to their current positions at the organization, and most interviewees described their training or backgrounds in social media as self-taught.

3.2.2 Interview Style and Guide

Interviews with key informants were conducted with 34 staff members of participant organizations. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and were guided by a list of potential questions and themes informed by the project’s research questions and the organization’s own social media content. Interview participants were asked about

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9 To view a complete interview guide containing sample questions see Appendix 3.
their organization’s structure, resources, goals, definitions of success, and evaluation processes on social media. Interview participants were also encouraged to pose their own questions or expand on areas of interest to them. The semi-structured interview provided an avenue for thoughtful, constructive, and highly descriptive conversations with interview participants, and the collection and analysis of social media data were extremely beneficial to the overall interview process. The topics discussed with key informants ranged from broad perceptions of social media’s efficacy and influence to detailed accounts of specific social media campaigns, strategies, visuals, and planning.

In order to collect interview data, notes were taken during interviews in order to ensure that I was better able to recall details regarding the day, time, and setting of the interview, as well as to record any particularly notable thoughts or themes which emerged during the conversation. I conducted each interview over the phone using a digital tape recorder, and then later transcribed the text of each in order to produce an accurate record for analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

There were three primary stages of data analysis. First, I read transcripts and interview notes in full to develop and add support to initial themes for later stages of coding. Reading the material through prior to analysis allowed me to become better acquainted with interview content as a whole. Next, I began to code my transcripts. According to Blair (2015), this method of analysis is dependent on creating labels (codes) that can be applied to data in order to develop data into meaningful categories to be analyzed and
interpreted. I also reviewed social media content saved to the Zotero application during this time in order to frame and reflect on the information gathered from key informant interviews. These data were used to compare interview responses to the social media content of their organization’s profiles. During this process, I continued to take notes taken on specific posts, aims, outcomes, or attitudes relating to the interview responses and their organization’s visible social media activity.

Second, I read each transcript and created a preliminary round of coding based on interview responses, available social media data, and research questions. This portion of my coding is consistent with a general inductive approach, which condenses raw textual data into a summary format, establishes clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings, and develops a framework of the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the data (Thomas 2006, 238). I used this form of coding because it provided a “simple, straightforward approach for deriving findings in the context of focused evaluation questions” (Thomas 2006, 237). While my initial codes were influenced by my early transcript readings, they were also informed by my research questions. In order to complete each round of coding, the qualitative data analysis software NVivo\(^\text{10}\) was used to electronically code, highlight, and organize each interview transcript. More distinct themes in the responses of interview participants began to emerge during the first round of coding, and a brief reflection on each preliminary code was written after the completion of the first round. These themes

\(^{10}\) For more information on NVivo, visit the product website at http://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/nvivo-products.
were used to outline and organize the thesis findings. In the third stage of data analysis, written reflections on the social media content and interview responses of key informants were used to guide the development of more detailed codes for the second round of coding. This final stage of coding was driven by participant responses. In this stage, my method of coding was deductive, open, and derived from the data. Deductive, or "open coding" attempts to identify the meaning within a text without any preconceptions, with the goal of creating a participant-led "theory' from the data" (Blair 2015, 17). I used this form of coding due to the fact that it aligned with my stated goal of focusing on the experiences and perceptions of communicators. This final round of coding supported the main themes of the thesis findings and subsequent discussion.

3.3.1 Round I Coding

The first round of transcript coding aimed to identify and develop themes present in the interviews with key informants. I created an initial set of codes to provide detail and depth to the project’s three research questions: (1) How do environmental non-profit organizations use social media to advance their goals, (2) How do environmental non-profit organizations conceptualize success in social media, and (3) How do environmental non-profit organizations perceive the spatiality of social media?

Developing the first set of codes was an iterative process which involved a full reading of each interview transcript, the research notes taken during and after the interviews, and the review of social media data collected and saved by the Zotero application. While examining interview transcripts and organizational social media data, I noted several common themes and recurring terminology. With the project’s research
questions in mind, I then refined these themes and terminology into a set of seven general codes for the first round of coding. For a list of these preliminary codes, their relationship to the project’s research questions, and examples taken from interview texts, see the table below.

I read each transcript in order to locate representative quotes for each code, and key terms, such as “location,” were used to identify potential responses. I also selected quotations in accordance with the questions I had asked during the interview or by topics brought up by the interviewee. For example, if I had asked key informants about their goals for social media, these responses were coded as “Goals” during the first round. If key informants brought up their goals for social media or the organization naturally during our conversation, these quotations were also coded under the same heading. While coding, any topics or quotations of interest that were not currently being searched for were coded as “various” and set aside for later inspection.

Table 1: Round I Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Round I Code Question</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) How do environmental non-profit organizations use social media to advance their goals?</td>
<td>(a) Influences on Social Media Practices</td>
<td>(1a) “We are constantly zapping around the whole office like, “Oh, look at these people are doing, look at what these people are doing.” We kind of keep all of that, I keep all that in a folder, so that when it’s time to sit down and say, “All right, what are we really doing and what’s really out there?” Then we can kind of take a look back at those things (Participant 15).”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Social Media Campaigns/Focus Issues</td>
<td>(1b) “I really see social media as a way to get our message out to more people, let them know who we are and what we do (Participant 31).”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1c) “We’re focusing now on building content for ocean acidification, blue carbon, sustainable tourism, and marine debris (Participant 18).”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) How do environmental non-profit organizations conceptualize success in social media?</td>
<td>(a) Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2a) “Success is getting people involved. You know, getting people to sign up for it and to participate (Participant 6).”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Perceptions of Social Media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2b) “I feel like one of the greatest benefits of social media is just that you have a way to engage with your audience on a daily basis, and it's on a channel which they prefer to engage on. You're not interrupting them, you're not distracting them from a television show or something like that. They're on social media because they're there to engage and they want to hear from you (5).”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) How do environmental non-profit organizations perceive social media’s spatiality?</td>
<td>(a) Location Mentions with regards to Social Media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3a) “We're not broadcasting it out to millions of people, we're really like -- if we're focusing something here locally, the target audience that Facebook says they can reach might be 5,000 people in that age range. So it's very targeted for us (Participant 26).”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncategorized Themes, Concepts, Quotes of Interest</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When I first came in actually, everybody had their hands on it. The backend of Facebook had like probably three or four different people in it. So I got here and I was like, “Okay.” I feel like I nixed everybody basically in one of my first meetings. I got everybody removed from it</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
because I feel like it’s important to have a really solid voice, at least coming from one person (Participant 12).”

3.3.2 Round II Coding

A reflection on each code was written after the first round of coding, summarizing the primary impressions from each code and identifying some of the most frequently mentioned terminology and responses. I developed a secondary set of codes from these reflections in order to add detail to the research themes and identify illustrative examples to determine the research findings. Representative quotations were located in the same manner as the first round of coding, based upon either interview questions or informant responses that appeared to fit within the confines of the selected code. See the table below for a list of these secondary codes.

Table 2: Round I and Round II Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Round I Code</th>
<th>Round II Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) How do environmental non-profit organizations use social media to advance their goals</td>
<td>(a) Influences on Social Media Practices</td>
<td>(i) Organization Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(ii) Process of Creating Social Media Posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(iii) Voice and Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(iv) Social Media “Best Practices”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(v) Social Media Culture/Trends

(vi) Budget

(vii) ROI

(viii) Training/Background

(ix) Other Influences

(b) Goals

(i) Awareness

(ii) Engagement

(iii) Metrics

(iv) Issue/Campaign Goals

(v) Public/Private Relationship Building

(vi) Other Organizations

(vii) Other Goals

(i) Awareness
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(2) How do environmental non-profit organizations conceptualize success in social media?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Metrics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) Issue-Campaign Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iv) Fundraising and Membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(v) Other Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Perceptions of Social Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Advantages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) Online Activism/Slacktivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iv) Other Perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(v) Perceptions of space (Q3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(3) How do environmental non-profit organizations perceive social media’s spatiality?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Location Mentions with regards to Social Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Social Media Channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Visibility (of specific place or ecosystem)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) Global Mentions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3.3 Post-Coding Analysis

After both rounds of coding were completed, the responses for each code were removed from the main text of the transcribed interviews and read separately. Notes were taken to describe any majority objectives, behaviors, or perceptions of social media. If outliers or differences of opinion were present, notations were made to describe these as well. When necessary, the social media content of participant organizations was also referred to in order to add perspective on interviewee responses and codes. These notes were later used to compose the first draft of the research findings.

3.4 Summary of Methods and Analysis

This chapter has described and detailed the methods I used to investigate and respond to the research questions outlined for this project. I used semi-structured interviews with key informants to examine the perspectives, processes, and actions taken by environmental non-profit organizations using social media. The transcripts of these interviews and first round of coding were integral to developing the research findings described in the following chapter, while the second round of coding refined, organized, and added support to these findings. Following the coding of key informant interviews, I read each code separately and wrote a brief reflection of the main ideas and
terminology found in each code in order to determine the research findings. The following chapter will offer a detailed description of the findings which resulted from the methods and analysis outlined above.
4 Findings

The following chapter will report on the findings of this research. As discussed in the first chapter, these findings aim to address the following three research questions: (i) How do environmental non-profit organizations use social media to advance their goals? (ii) How do environmental non-profit organizations conceptualize success in social media, and (iii) How do environmental non-profit organizations perceive the spatiality of social media? The sections below address the main findings of the research. Quotations from participant interviews will be integrated within the text in order to highlight the principal themes of the findings and provide additional context.

Influences on the social media practices of the environmental non-profit organizations which participated in this research will be described in the first section in order to better contextualize both the goals and definitions of success that key informants attributed to their social media participation. Next, goals and definitions of success will be discussed, followed by a description of informant perspectives on social media and space. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the main findings of the research.

4.1 Influences on Social Media Practices

Research participants described a number of influences on the social media practices of their organizations. Social media practices, such as how content is created, when content is posted, and how social media is managed within organizations, differed between organizations, but key themes were visible across the sample. The primary influencing factors discussed by research participants were (i) the structure of the organizations, including the role of participants and availability of resources (ii)
perceptions of organizational voice and identity on social media and within the organization, (iii) contemporary social media trends and commonly referred to as “best practices,” and (iv) social media audiences and other organizations. The influences discussed by research participants have the ability to support or shape the content, goals, definitions of success, and perceptions of social media within the organization. The following sections will describe each influence in greater detail.

4.1.1 Organization Structure

Due to their work in social media on behalf of organizations, key informants themselves were a strong influence on the content, strategies, and management of their organization’s social media profiles. The majority of key informants interviewed were the sole employees of their organization responsible for creating, managing, monitoring, and interacting with social media, though they frequently held other communications or marketing responsibilities unrelated to social media as well, such as writing print communications and press releases, constituent outreach and fundraising efforts, or technical support services such as website maintenance. In most cases, one individual was responsible for the majority of social media work within organizations, despite the size, resources, or focus of the organization. Most key informants described their role as gatekeepers and conduits for social media content which was collected from different areas within the organization. For instance,

“We have a pretty large organization at this point, over 100 staff members in a lot of different places and working on a lot of different issues. I manage the main accounts, Twitter, FB, Pinterest and other accounts like that are the overarching center accounts. Some activists and scientists in other places... have their own twitter handles and accounts that they use for promoting the issues that they are...
working on. A lot of times my job is sort of treating our SM account as sort of a newsroom and prioritizing and deciding - I'm sort of the clearinghouse for all of the press releases, petitions, infographics, etc. I have to prioritize what goes where, what are most important actions right now, what has institutional priority” (Participant 4, environmental protection and conservation organization with a budget of over 13.5 million).

The majority of interviewees had some established process for involving other areas of the organization and employees in the production of social media content, either through the formation of separate social media accounts which could then be used to share content at the organization level or staff submission of materials through a form or email to a content curator. The response above was typical of many conversations with key informants who used staff input and social media accounts to curate and share social media content on behalf of the organization at large. However, it was rare that employees other than the informant interviewed were given unrestricted access to posting or interacting with social media profiles. As highlighted in the quote, restricted access to social media accounts and content production was often described as integral for maintaining the appearance of institutional priorities. This was true for organizations that encouraged staff involvement with social media content production as well as those which were solely produced by a single, or small team, of social media employees.

4.1.1.1 Financial Resources

Discussions regarding the financial cost and relative value of social media revealed that most key informants were often conflicted or undecided about the relationship between the two. While the majority of participants from all budget groups described social media
as essentially free or low-cost marketing for their organizations, a small number from
the lowest-tier budget group described social media as a costly endeavor in terms of
both time and money. Across all budget groups, financial resources were most often
discussed in relation to social media advertising. The majority of key informants
interviewed had spent organizational funds on social media advertising, often in the
interest of attracting new audiences to their social media profiles, publicizing an event,
or engaging social media users in the interest of completing a time-sensitive action
alert, such as signing a petition or contacting a legislator on behalf of the organization.
When asked, the majority of key informants were satisfied with the amount of funding
they were currently able to put into online marketing campaigns, but also expressed an
interest in better understanding the relationships between the amount of money spent
and successfully achieving their organization’s goals for social media. Key informants
representing organizations that did not provide funding for social media expressed a
similar interest in the relationship between financial capital and success on social
media. As one key informant described,

“It’s just not part of our organizational structure to have A) a very big budget for
communications, but then B) of course within that social media. It would be, I
think, challenging for some of our leaders and board to see the value of a $500
or a $1000 social media budget. They would question the return on that, of
course. So, that’s challenging. I think… I would like a social budget so that that I
could experiment a bit more with perhaps some promoted accounts or publishing
some messages, so that... I could show them the return” (Participant 17, national
forest conservation organization involved in grantmaking, budget between $3.5
million to $13.5 million).
These concerns regarding the relationship between funding and success, and especially the considerations of leadership, were similarly felt across organizations which provided funding for social media marketing in their annual budgets. In organizations which had received financial support for social media funding, several participants mentioned that securing funding for these efforts had been a difficult process which required a careful assessment of the perceived financial benefits of social media participation for the organization. Even in organizations where leadership was positively motivated to fund social media spending, concerns regarding the ROI, or return-on-investment of social media budgets were frequently mentioned. As one key informant explained,

“The board is very interested in, obviously, the ROI on social media. They do pay attention, you know, the marketing committee especially, on the rates of engagement, and growth, and all that stuff. Of course, since so much of my time is spent on this, we want to make sure that it's worth it. And so, it’s kind of – we've read all the books on ROI and it's pretty, it's all so new that even the so-called self-described social media experts, it's not – it’s all relative” (Participant 9, regional coastal waters and watersheds organization with a budget between $3.5 and $13.5 million).

The same key informant continued to describe a social media fundraising campaign that the organization was currently undertaking. The first of its kind, the organization had hoped to better establish and understand the return-on-investment, or cost per conversion, of social media spending and new memberships. However, the individual revealed that the effort was “not delivering in the way that we thought it would,” and mentioned that “it’s kind of forcing us to evaluate how effective social media is for fundraising. Is it really something that... we should use as a fundraising tool? Or is
this teaching us that other avenues are better suited to that?” This conversation was indicative of many such conversations with workers engaging with social media on behalf of organizations. While funding for social media advertising and content was often deemed important to the overall success of social media, few participants were able to describe the relationship between success and funding with examples taken from their own experiences within their organizations but perceived instead that additional funding in the future would allow for more concrete examples of measurable success to be shared with leadership.

4.1.2 Organizational Voice and Identity
Organizational voice and identity were often described as important influences over the content posted to the social media profiles of participant organizations. Nearly every key informant mentioned the importance of using appropriate language, grammar, and tone when interacting with social media profiles and audiences. Additionally, a large number expressed concerns that they be perceived as well-informed experts or thought leaders on issues represented by their organizations. In several organizations, staff members who were allowed to post on social media sites were first trained in the established “voice” of the organization before they were able to post on the organization’s behalf. Most key informants also highlighted the importance of maintaining a cohesive, trustworthy, and unified organizational identity on social media which was consistent with the branding, content, and mission statement of the organization. For instance, one individual stressed the importance of choosing content and monitoring the tone in which the content was presented.
“I have to, and want to, stay true to our very credible foundation as an organization, which is based in credible science, credible research, and so on. And so, when I’m sharing anything... I make sure that those are from credible sources, and I also make sure that the post itself is... I don’t want to be too glib about it [environmental hazards]” (Participant 34, regional conservation organization with a budget up to $3.5 million).

Concerns regarding content were also evident when organizations described targeting diverse audiences or representing specific locations on their social media. For instance, one key informant stressed the importance of “having multiple checkpoints” before sharing information directed at Alaskan natives or cross-border populations in order to ensure that audiences were not unfairly represented or otherwise offended by social media content (Participant 2, regional conservation and advocacy organization with a budget up to $3.5 million).

4.1.3 Social Media Trends

A similarly prevalent influence on social media content and its management was the practice of establishing “best practices” for social media, or guidelines for posting content, times for posting, post structure, and frequency. Best practices were, in general, best understood as the most effective methods for reaching social media audiences and engaging with them. Best practices could include the time of day when posting on social media would reach the maximum number of people, the ideal number of social media posts, or the types of images most likely to engage a given audience. The best practices for organizational social media use and their sources varied by the organization, but typically were attributed to general information provided on the internet for either for-profit or non-profit organizations. These best practices were sometimes
described as personal trial-and-error on the part of organizations, but were also frequently discovered by internet searches, trade blogs and publications, webinars, or books. As one participant described,

“People always talked about this 60/30/10 ratio on Twitter, which is like... I think it’s like 60% retweets, 30% your own content, and then I think the 10% is maybe direct engagement, like maybe direct replies to someone who tweets at you, tweets back to you, or something like that” (Participant 1, regional conservation organization with a budget up to $3.5 million).

While many research participants interviewed described the method of establishing the best practices for their own social media as due to internet searches or other publications, a number of participants discussed their age and personal knowledge of social media as a determining factor in their social media knowledge, activity, and occupation on behalf of the organization. Very few participants had any background in social media that they considered formal, and on-the-job learning and training was far more prevalent. Interview participants frequently used best practices established by themselves or by the organization’s social media history as guidelines for their social media participation, and often described following current trends in social media regarding content, posting times, structure, breaking news, or other trending topics as an important component of their social media work.

4.1.4 Social Media Audiences, Organizations, and Partners
The organizational social media of key informants interviewed was also influenced by their audiences, other organizations, and corporate partnerships. Social listening, a social media term used to describe the process of following and responding to relevant
hashtags, topics, or social media networks and conversations, was said to have an influence on social media content and management by many participants. As one informant described,

“There’s also an aspect where we're listening to what our audience is saying and the things that they're responding to, and we take that back to our urban foresters or our sustainable solutions folks and say like ‘hey, this is the trend that we're seeing. Can we work together to try to craft some messages that are going to be beneficial or relevant to this theme?’ So there's definitely kind of like a ping pong game that's always going on” (Participant 27, regional/urban conservation and advocacy organization with a budget between $3.5 and $13.5 million).

As we can see from the quote above, social media audiences of organizational accounts were very important to key informants. The interests of the audience frequently factored in to the type and style of content participants posted, when it was posted, and to which platforms. Key informants often discussed their efforts and successes in getting to know their audiences in terms of their likes, dislikes, interests, favored images, important issues, locations, and levels of interest in participating in online or offline actions. As evidenced by the social media data collected during the research project, key informants also engaged with their audiences directly by replying to comments or engaging with social media content posted by individuals, organizations, or other actors.

In the case of other organizations, the social media content and style of other environmental non-profit organizations often influenced key informants' behavior. All key informants from the organizations interviewed followed other organizational profiles, and posts from other organizations are visible on their dashboards. Key informants had
varying levels of engagement with other organizational profiles, but the content posted often influenced their own social media activity and behavior. The content of other organizations could have a direct effect on key informants’ social media activities. For example, as one informant described,

“We are constantly zapping around the whole office like, “Oh, look at what these people are doing, look at what these people are doing.” We kind of keep all of that, I keep all that in a folder, so that when it’s time to sit down and say, “All right, what are we really doing and what’s really out there?” Then we can kind of take a look back at those things” (Participant 15, regional environmental protection organization with a budget up to $3.5 million).

Aside from informing organizational content, the social media content of other organizations could also be engaged with in order to communicate environmental issues, join the conversation around a particular issue or goal, or to promote the work of fellow environmental organizations.

4.2 Goals for Social Media

Research participants identified a number of goals for engaging with social media on behalf of their organizations. Organizations differed in their interest, application, structure, or management of goals for their social media participation. Although the majority of research participants had established firm objectives for their organization’s participation in social media, a smaller number explained that setting specific goals for social media participation was often difficult, confusing, or informal and open-ended. For instance, one participant pointed out that, “I think as we’re starting to go into a more
campaign-oriented mind set there will be more goals coming from social media. Right now, it is just trying to get more eyeballs on us” (Participant 18, ocean conservation and education foundation with a budget between $3.5 and $13.5 million).

Despite these considerations, current, planned, or future goal-setting practices and perceptions were frequently discussed at length by participants. While the goals established for social media participation varied widely between organizations, many common themes and ideas were discussed by participants. The most commonly identified goals for social media participation amongst organizations were (i) awareness, (ii) engagement, (iii) improving social media metrics and advertising, (iv) building relationships with other organizations, and (v) growing member bases and fundraising.

4.2.1 Awareness

When asked about their goals for social media, interview participants primarily mentioned awareness as a fundamental priority of social media. Similar to participant discussions of voice and identity, organizational awareness was discussed in terms of brand identity, in relation to organizational projects or targets, and with regards to environmental issues more generally. For instance, one interview participant pointed out the importance of awareness when it came to building dams as opposed to more well-known environmental issues, such as climate change.

“I think for us social media is especially important because our issue actually isn’t as well-known as something say like climate change or – and climate change fits into our work, but there is still this perception that hydropower is a renewable energy source and that it’s like the perfect solution to moving away from a carbon economy. We’re, always in the back of our mind is, of course, we’ve moved past that and we’re doing a lot more specific work, but one of our goals throughout
and continually is to just really spread awareness about the fact of all the terrible impacts environmentally and socially of large dams” (Participant 10, international water protection organization with a budget under $3.5 million).

While this participant cites the importance of issue-specific awareness, other participants addressed the goal of relationship-building with target social media audiences. For instance, another participant described the goal of awareness as,

“I really see social media as a way to get our message out to more people, let them know who we are and what we do… I think it’s really helping to get what we do out there to more people. You know, a younger crowd, hopefully, and a more diverse crowd, and that sort of thing” (Participant 31, water education and advocacy organization with a budget under $3.5 million).

The primary difference between these similar goals of awareness is that participants who cited the goal of environmental/issue awareness were less likely to have a formal strategy established for instituting or measuring the success of these stated goals. Comparatively, the goal of organizational/brand awareness was frequently accompanied by more specific targets and measurements (which will be discussed in more detail below).

4.2.2 Engagement

A second goal commonly mentioned by the majority of participants was engagement. Engagement could be related to an organization’s ability to connect with partner organizations or for-profit groups, connecting with the greater social media conversation by using specific hashtags, the behavior of social media audiences (such as sharing organizational content with their own followers, participating in online actions, or reading, sharing, or commenting on posts). Most frequently, engagement was related to
social media audiences connecting with content posted by organizations to their personal channels. As one participant described,

“If our stuff is getting seen, and shared, and liked and commented on, that to me is an effective piece of information. And it doesn't necessarily have to be well received to be effective. It’s more about engaging and initiating conversations around topics, so as long as people are talking about the issues and thinking about the issues, that’s an effective push” (Participant 20, international conservation and social justice organization with a budget between $3.5 and $13.5 million).

Engagement was discussed by key informants as either a feeling of being connected to audiences, as described above, or as a measurable goal. When discussed in terms of a measurable goal, most key informants relied on social media marketing best practices and terminology to define and establish targets for this goal. Social media metrics, the numeric data on the number of clicks, likes, views, and shares that a post, profile, or hashtag is associated with, were frequently used to set guidelines for present and future social media goal-setting. However, metric data and engagement were not always considered synonymous by all participants. For example,

“There was a big push before I got here to be really about increasing numbers. And my philosophy is that that’s not the most important thing... and it doesn’t necessarily signify that you’re doing a good job, because you have a lot of people listening to you. It’s really about, you know, people interacting and actually understanding and engaging with the material that you’re putting out there. I think particularly for the types of work that we do, like where things are very complex issues. It’s more important that people are asking questions and are getting involved with the materials and just kind of paying attention to it” (Participant 32, international water protection organization with a budget over $13.5 million).

While targets for the type of engagement, such as the difference in participating with content versus taking a specified action, may have differed between organizations,
the term itself was regularly employed in discussions regarding the goals, successes, perceptions, and overall aim of social media participation. Despite these differences in defining engagement (whether it be the number of followers of a certain social media channel or the number of times a post is shared), the term was very often cited by research participants as one of their main goals in interviews.

4.2.3 Metrics and Advertising

When social media metrics were described as a primary goal of social media, goals were frequently established by examining the organization’s previous performance or in relation to issue or campaign-specific targets. For example, if an organization’s most previously shared and commented on social media post received 100 shares and 100 comments, the majority of research participants interviewed would consider a social media post receiving 101 shares and 101 comments a success. However, the goal of the social media post was not necessarily set out to receive better numbers than a previous post. Metric goals are also often tied to the number of ‘likes’ or ‘follows’ an organization receives on their social media accounts. As one participant explained,

“We have in the past also made very concerted efforts to do very specific social media campaigns to try and build up our likability, like one of our goals with our Facebook is to catch up with [competitor/similar NPO], because they’re just in front of us in terms of the amount of likes they have on their page. So, we have goals like that, that are kind of casual work more playful and fun for us really” (Participant 20, international conservation and social justice organization with a budget between $3.5 and $13.5 million).

Overall, metrics were described predominantly as secondary goals for social media, generally used to inform but not drive the objectives of social media participation.
Metrics and their relationship will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

4.2.4 Connecting with Other Organizations and ‘Signal Boosting’

While some of the goals established for social media reflected the interests of the organization itself, other goals, such as issue or environmental awareness seemed to coincide with those expressed by the larger community of non-profit environmental organizations. These often similar goals of drawing attention to environmental risks or degradation, calling out private and public actors for acting against the interests of the environment, or contacting politicians in order to advocate for greater environmental protection, often contributed to a secondary goal of connecting with other organizations and furthering their content, otherwise known as “signal-boosting.”

Promoting the content of other organizations not only influenced the content posted and shared by the research participant’s organization, but also allowed for greater communication between organizations generally. This relationship was often described as beneficial and reciprocal as well, and was a commonly held belief. As one participant described, sharing content amongst organizations “usually helps and that pulls in audiences that are already kind of interested in what you’re working on, and hopefully help you reach new people that are in your partners’ audiences that aren’t in yours” (Participant 8, regional environmental protection and advocacy organization with a budget of under $3.5 million).
4.2.5 Member Networks and Fundraising

Another goal primarily associated with social media was fundraising. However, many participants were divided or unsure about their current ability to set or track fundraising’s relationship to social media generally or specific social media metrics. As one participant pointed out,

“When I do a campaign in the holidays, I’ll do kind of a “holiday appeal” campaign on Facebook which means four or six dedicated postings like, “Hey, it’s that time of year, give back to your national forest,” or “Give the gift of trees.” That, of course the goal is donations, which is something that I don’t know if anyone has had much success with directly on social media. But we always do it to a degree because it would seem remiss not to. So that goal, it’s a little bit different” (Participant 17, national forest conservation organization involved in grantmaking, budget between $3.5 million to $13.5 million).

One commonly mentioned goal for social media often referred to as “school building” integrated components of awareness, engagement, metrics, and fundraising. This was also sometimes described as a “pipeline of engagement,” in which the purpose was to move social media audience members from awareness to donors. For instance,

“I think [the goal is] to engage with our audiences and I think it’s an opportunity to kind of grow our audience… to increase our brand visibility… leveraging the tools, kind of using social as a jumping off point for deeper engagement, so kind of creating that engagement kind of pathway, or funnel, if you will. To kind of get the people, get in front of the people that might be our more passionate supporters and then converting them to people who might take an online action, or people who will go on one of our outings, or people who will eventually share our articles, and the ultimate goal is to get them to be a donor” (Participant 8, regional environmental protection and advocacy organization with a budget of under $3.5 million).

Although the relationship between social media, awareness building, building membership lists, and fundraising was frequently mentioned by most research
participants, very few seemed comfortable with describing the specifics of such a conversion process. Similar to the for-profit measurement of social media’s ‘return-on-investment’, there did not appear to be a system in place to accurately ascertain or display the market value of social media participation. For the most part, the conversion from awareness to donor was often assumed but rarely measured, leaving many research participants to express an interest in discovering more about this relationship.

4.3 Defining Success on Social Media

Definitions of success with regards to social media also varied greatly between research participants. While the majority of definitions provided noted that determining what constituted successful social media practices for their organization was an important component of their participation in social media, participants sometimes disagreed on the effectiveness of particular methods for measuring and evaluating awareness online. Many of the themes discussed during conversations regarding success were similar to those mentioned in discussions regarding the goals for social media. The main determinants of success were (i) awareness and growth, and (ii) social media metrics.

4.3.1 Awareness and Growth

While in many instances, social media metric data was itself identified as a key indicator of success without further defining successful awareness, engagement, or relationship building, basic social media metric data could generally be applied as a measurement of how ‘aware’ key informants believe their audiences to be, based upon their participation with organizational content. However, informants also stated that their impact on increasing ‘awareness’ could be largely assumed by their participation in social media,
or “getting the message out there” ( Participant 2, regional environmental protection and advocacy organization with a budget of under $3.5 million). A smaller group of participants acknowledged that while awareness was an important component of success, it was either impossible or unrealistic to verify in general terms. As one participant noted,

“That’s something we’ve struggled with… measuring the sort of influence factor, or how our social media is shaping the conversation? Really hard to do. We look at numbers of likes, shares, comments, etcetera as sort of a proxy for that. That, okay there’s… this seems to be striking a chord with people or whatever. But there’s no way that we have found to clearly measure that impact” ( Participant 14, regional environmental protection and advocacy organization with a budget of under $3.5 million).

In some cases, awareness as success could also be attributed to a specific audience or individual outside an organization’s social media following or a given channel’s network. This audience-specific method of perceiving success was also frequently mentioned in conversations regarding issue-specific successes. For example, one participant defined success as:

“Seeing big numbers of people engage with this and re-tweet and share our petitions, and then we can look also at the number of signatures that we get on our petitions. So, you know, there are these different metrics. Obviously then the highest one would have been having if Barack Obama responded like "Hey, sorry guys. I will take care of the [environmental issue]’ which – that’s a ‘pie in the sky’ kind of thing, but that would then be like ultimate measure of success, right?" ( Participant 4, environmental protection and conservation organization with a budget of over 13.5 million).

However, definitions of success were often much more detailed and measurable than social media generally, though they were also often described in relation to social media
metrics such as how many people viewed or shared an individual post. Additional components, such as taking a specific action online, could then be integrated into the success of an offline accomplishment. For instance, one participant described how they were able to incorporate successful social media metrics into a campaign targeting Starbucks’ use of palm oil in their products.

“It was all about calling out Starbucks, publicly doing it, getting them on the hook, and so there the outcome is the amount of generated social media buzz, so that when our folks who are actually having these conversations with Starbucks… They can go in and be like, “Look, this is an issue and we were able to generate this much conversation on Twitter. There were this many retweets with this many impressions. People are talking about this and that should factor into your decisions when you’re making these kinds of decisions about your palm oil policy” (Participant 30, national science education, technology, and sustainability organization with a budget over $13.5 million).

Although awareness was by far the more common indicator of success, despite being relatively undefined by so many, social media network growth was typically a more measurable indicator of success. While regularly discussed in general terms, such as a network growing from year to year, or the spread of a specific environmental issue or organizational priority across networks, more detailed discussions of growth occurred in relation to social media metric data.

4.3.2 Metrics of Success

Social media metrics, or the analytic data provided by social media channels or additional applications, were the most often cited indicator of success on social media for research participants. As many participants also discussed social media success in regards to its use as a tool for fundraising efforts and membership building, a number of
these conversations included descriptions of social media’s return-on-investment for organizations, attempting to equate a dollar amount generated by social media advertising with the cost of the advertisements themselves and sometimes contrasting this cost per-donation with more traditional forms of advertising such as print or radio. In this way, social media was typically found to be the lowest cost form of advertising with the greatest potential for fundraising. As one participant noted,

“We’re an organization that used to spend lots and lots and lots of money to bring new people into the organization. I mean just tens of thousands of dollars every year to move people into the organization, and then as I mentioned before, move them “up the ladder of engagement.” And one of the things I have been able to do since 2013 is we’ve gone from getting about 10% of our new people into the organization from social media to 98%. I mean, it’s a dramatic shift to the point where almost everybody who is now part of our organization and active, minus like the major donors who’ve been with us for a long time, et cetera, almost everybody has come in through social media in some capacity and we’ve now moved them up into [our] world” (Participant 7, regional environmental protection and advocacy organization with a budget under $3.5 million).

This quotation is indicative of the type of success which was defined by those organizations who engaged in measuring success by its relationship to fundraising dollars, although it is more detailed than many.

A number of other participants expressed concern over how to directly measure or prove the relationship between fundraising or membership acquisition and social media. As one participant pointed out,

“In regards to fundraising, I'm not sure if folks find our platforms, then go to our website, then go to our donate page. That's kind of hard to tell. We definitely don't have any strong data that relates those two things together” (Participant 13,
marine ecosystem protection and conservation organization with a budget under $3.5 million).

In addition to measuring the relationship between metric data and membership, social media metrics were often used to describe, define, and evaluate the success of other, less concrete goals, such as engagement and awareness. These goals were often tracked and recorded using the information available through social media channels or supporting applications. While awareness was arguably the more difficult to measure in terms of success, the reported numbers for “engagement” given as a social media metric via the social media channels was often substituted as an indicator of success for both engagement and awareness.

### 4.4 Summary of Findings

This chapter has presented the main findings of this research. Several key themes, including the influences, goals, and definitions of success held by interview participants working in the social media of non-profit environmental organizations have been discussed and supported by quotations from the participants themselves. I determined the key influences over social media described by research participants to be (i) the structure of the organizations, including the role of participants and resources (ii) perceptions of organizational voice and identity on social media and within the organization, (iii) contemporary social media trends and commonly cited “best practices,” and (iv) interactions with social media audiences and other organizations. The primary goals of organizations were next identified as (i) awareness, (ii) engagement, (iii) improving social media metrics and advertising, (iv) building...
relationships with other organizations, and (v) growing member bases and fundraising. Finally, the main determinants of success were revealed as (i) awareness and growth, and (ii) social media metrics. I will draw on these themes in the next chapter in order to discuss the relationship between these findings and current literature.
5 Discussion

This chapter will address the debates present in the existing literature on social media and describe how they relate to the findings the research. These debates, (i) space and social media, (ii) value and social media, and (iii) social change and social media, will be reintroduced and discussed in relation to the social media perceptions and activities of non-profit environmental organizations.

5.1 Space and Social Media

As discussed in the literature review, geographers continue to question and debate what constitutes ‘virtual space’ and examine its relationship to tangible, offline spaces. Early theorists described virtual space as a new, separate field of research that is independent from material space (Batty 1997; Taylor 1996; Thrift 1996). More recently, it has been argued that virtual spaces are emerging as place-making projects which create new opportunities for negotiating social processes within the virtual commons (Adams 2010; Agnew 2011; Zavattaro and Sementelli 2014). While these perspectives are important to our overall understanding of spatiality and the internet, this research does not intend to answer the question of how geographers should perceive virtual space or draw lines between the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’ world. Instead, I follow in the footsteps of authors such as Beer and Burrows, Graham, and Kinsley, which have focused less on describing the differences or similarities between online and offline spaces, and more on understanding the ways in which the two interact with one another (Beer and Burrows 2013; Graham 2010; Kinsley 2013a). These arguments contend that
despite the fact that these social interactions are, by their nature, virtual, the activities taking place within social media channels are no less real (Beer and Burrows 2013).

As I described in the methodology of this research project, non-profit environmental organizations have strong ties to material places as well as high rates of social media use. This project’s findings on goals and success were particularly useful in understanding how the spatiality of social media is conceptualized by those who produce and utilize it. Research participants have a complex and multi-faceted perception of space as it relates to social media. This indicates that they perceive social media as both place-based and virtual. Participants discussed their organization’s goals and definitions of success for social media in relation to both physical and online spaces, and frequently engaged with multiple levels of both material and virtual scale in their day-to-day activities. For example, a goal for social media might be the protection of a specific physical location, but the indicators of success might be tied to digital benchmarks such as the number of likes, shares, or follows on a social media post. This post, produced and shared in an online space, might be targeted to social media audiences that inhabit the same physical location, or created with the aim of reaching as many social media users as possible, regardless of their proximity. This is one of many ways in which the virtual and material world overlapped in the day-to-day activities of non-profit environmental organizations. This section will discuss two key research participant perspectives on location (i) how social media is perceived as place-based or ‘local’ and (ii) how social media is interpreted as a ‘global’ digital landscape, and explain how non-profit environmental workers engage with both perspectives.
5.1.1 Place and Social Media

Research participants described social media as a useful tool to connect with and communicate about physical spaces in numerous ways. It should be noted that research participants discussing “local” social media were most often invoking the word as it applied to various methods of social media advertising or production in their conversations regarding social media use on behalf of their organizations. For the purposes of this research, place-based social media methods are defined as those which have a distinct tie to a “local” community, geographic area, or ecosystem. These social media activities are not necessarily intended to apply to or reach global audiences. For example, organizations working to address an environmental concern within a particular neighborhood, city, state, or region might create and share content with the sole purpose of communicating with and garnering support from social media users who live within that area. However, in other instances, these same organizations might address an environmental concern that exists within those same geographic boundaries, but with the purpose of attracting as much attention from social media users as possible, regardless of the physical location of those users. This was most frequently observed in discussions about “awareness” as it related to social media. In such cases where the purpose is to attract only the attention of ‘local’ social media users, social media marketing strategies such as geo-targeting, or targeting a social media audience based upon their shared location, zip code, or other identified geographic coordinates, were the most commonly described. For example, as one participant described,
“We have advocacy alerts, which is, we direct people to our homepage and there’s a certain page where you can write a letter to your legislator saying a number of things. We have different forms, but the one we’re... encouraging people to participate in right now is the microbead campaign... We want to get microbeads banned in personal care products in different states. And where that’s the case, you write your legislator. And that’s state dependent, so we’ll geotarget different links to different states because some states already have a ban, some states the language is different. So yes, geotargeting is used really frequently” (Participant 1, regional conservation organization with a budget up to $3.5 million).

From quotes such as the one above we can see that non-profit environmental workers do not view social media as inherently placeless. Instead, strategies such as geotargeting have strong ties to physical landscapes and social media users located within material boundaries, especially with regards to organizational goals. In this case, the goal is to ban microbeads in a regional area. In order to accomplish this goal, social media content was produced for social media users living within that region, and specific decision makers were targeted based upon the geographical information provided to organizations through the virtual network connecting them to their audience. Similarly, research participants reported using social media to recruit volunteers and organize offline events. Each of these instances of online engagement with ‘local’ communities or geographically targeted audiences display a strong connection between online activities and offline spaces.

The physical location of the non-profit environmental organizations themselves also factored into participants’ perceptions of social media and their activities online. For example, a small number of participants whose organizations were located in remote or rural areas reported that their engagement with social media was impacted by a lack of
access to a reliable internet connection, either with regards to the organization itself or within the geographic areas targeted by the organization. As one participant explained,

“I think, especially being out in the middle of nowhere and just recently getting high speed internet, we were... I would say low on the boat in terms of embracing social media, in terms of a way of... communicating with members” (Participant 15, regional environmental protection organization with a budget up to $3.5 million).

A similar focus on location was also observed when participants discussed the importance of voice, identity, or representation on social media. While voice and identity were principal concerns of many participants, representation was an especially important factor in the decision making and online activities of organizations which operated in conjunction with indigenous lands, audiences, or social issues. For example, a research participant in Alaska described the importance of perspective and context when communicating with cross-border or cross-cultural audiences. This participant explained that the organization employs a tribal liaison to ensure that any content posted which might relate to Alaska natives is cross-checked, because “there are a lot of... nuances to something that we might say down here that might not apply up there... Something that we might talk about down here might be offensive to them” (Participant 2, regional conservation and advocacy organization with a budget up to $3.5 million). These examples demonstrate that the content produced and shared by organizations, as well as their other online activities, are directly connected to material landscapes. As Kinsley (2013a) suggests, despite the fact that the methods of
communication are virtual by design, the activities taking place within these virtual spaces are no less grounded in material geographies.

5.1.2 The Digital Landscape

Although research participants made numerous connections between their online activities and offline material environments, conversations regarding social media channels and their audiences regularly involved descriptions of distinct digital spaces as well. Similar to physical locations, participant descriptions of social media channels were often described as ‘places’ where goals were determined, information was communicated, and success was evaluated. Unlike physical spaces, the information used to set and measure the success of these goals were tied directly to social media audiences and their online participation with content. Unlike social media activities tied to physical places, such as geotargeting local advocacy outreach efforts, the goals and determinants of success of these actions were located entirely online. For example, participants often described analytics as a key indicator of their social media’s success. As a goal or measurement of success, this analytic data (such as the number of likes, shares, or comments on a social media post), does not display a direct connection with offline landscapes. Though these posts may supply content that is representative of material landscapes, they also exist within a virtual community. In the case of attributing success to an amount of likes, shares, or other engagement, there is no expectation that the social media audiences interacting with the online content are necessarily from any particular place, or that any specific offline action should be taken. Instead,
communication about the environment or an environmental issue, as well as the solution presented, are expected to take place online.

Even in instances where organizations were primarily focused on issues facing local or regional communities, many organizations still expressed concerns regarding the visibility and global reach of social media and social media posts. The ‘global nature’ of social media was frequently cited in conversations regarding organizational identity, environmental awareness, and audience engagement. For example, research participants located in or working with communities other than their own often mentioned concerns regarding social media content, phrasing, and visibility and the impact these factors could have on the organization’s global identity and reputation.

5.1.3 Non-profit Environmental Organizations: Navigating ‘Place’ in Online Spaces

While material and online spaces and local and global scales of social media were mentioned in conversations with research participants, they were typically not discussed as either existing solely in one ‘place’ or at one scale. Instead, social media was described as both place-based and local as well as virtual and globally accessible. Research participants both perceived and utilized social media as such, frequently moving between scales, engaging diverse audiences from local communities or the global commons, and co-producing content and messaging on issues that impacted a wide range of individual spaces, landscapes, and ecosystems. This shifting in perspective from either local or global is important because it reflects contemporary debates on the “place” of social media and other web 2.0 technologies, specifically
those that wish to do away with the terms “local” and “global” in favor of mapping user networks and connectivity (Adams 2010; Graham 2009). Online place-making activities, such as joining Facebook groups or participating in Reddit threads, have created new avenues for negotiating complex social processes within the virtual commons (Adams 2010; Zavattaro and Sementelli 2014). These sentiments were frequently echoed in participant interviews. For example, as one participant described their online actions,

“If it’s a campaign specifically, it really is a kind of layered process in terms of making sure we’re appealing to the activists, as well as the information consumer, as well as the new person who might not necessarily be thinking about it. And when we go into an action, we use that hashtag to build the community around it, so that we have something trackable and traceable. Oftentimes, we’ll send out and say, “Hey! Today we’re doing a day of action on social media. Here’s a hashtag, here are the mentions that we need to use.” And that helps us to really synergize the energy that we need to move forward in terms of how we interact with the different corporations that we’re creating new policies with” (Participant 20, international conservation and social justice organization with a budget between $3.5 and $13.5 million).

As evidenced by this quote, social media can allow for non-profit environmental organizations to build a sense of community among their supporters, connect with new audiences, and forge relationships with for-profit corporations in new ways that they recognize as multi-faceted and complex.

Overall, the sharing and collaboration of data within online social networks has allowed for the growth and integration of user knowledge, resources, and community development that transcends local and national scales, and transformed the means by which individuals identify themselves and affiliate with groups (Adams 2010; Bennett 2012). At the heart of these network-space theories is the assertion that as access to
virtual space increases, so does an individual’s ability to move beyond “more or less fixed spatial units that appear as politics of place” (Rye 2013, 148), and towards a new global identity that is “less connected to physical proximity but rather developed through the use of various digital media” (Rye 2013, 149). In this research project, participants understood social media as simultaneously local and global, as well as virtual and material. For example, even in the case of organizations with large online presences, such as the one described above, online audience participation is always affixed to an offline, physical place. Similarly, in the case of place-based outreach methods such as geotargeting, the medium between physical places and organizations is entirely virtual. The emergence of these new pathways for personal expression and community development are incredibly important to the study of virtual geography, online activism, and equivalencies of scale because they constitute an entirely new spatial relationship with the self and others.

5.2 Value and Social Media

The concept of social media’s ‘value’ was a very important topic for research participants. Throughout the research project, participants frequently discussed social media’s perceived value, expressed diverse expectations, measurements, and indicators of social media’s worth for organizations, the environment, and society. While social media was often described as being integral to the success of a given organization, precise or specific indicators of either success or value were less uniform. Social media’s value was regularly described in one of two ways, as either (i) a profitable marketing strategy with a calculable financial return on an organization’s
investments in time and capital, or (ii) an indicator of positive social engagement with environmental issues. The following sections will discuss these different perspectives on value and engage in a more thorough discussion of their processes than the previous chapter.

5.2.1 Social Media Marketing

As I discussed in the findings of this research, the day-to-day functions and responsibilities of social media work were distributed differently between various organizations. In most cases, the social media channels of organizations were managed by one individual, though small teams or outside input from other areas of the organization were common. The goals for social media participation also differed between organizations. However, the most commonly cited value of social media to organizations was that of a marketing tool. Research participants regularly described social media's value to their organization as a means to locate and supply funding to their projects, either through direct financial contributions or new member acquisition. The ability to build a strong online identity, or brand, was frequently mentioned as both a goal and as an indicator of success. For example, as one participant described,

“We ran a bunch of advertising around that, just sort of promoting the contest to people. So, you know, there's like the process of crafting the copy of the ad, making sure that there is like an actual visual identity, so designing that identity, making sure that like our targeting is set up. And then looking at which ads are like the most successful and getting engagement” (Participant 32, international water protection organization with a budget over $13.5 million).
As displayed in the quote above, the goals, strategies, and indicators for success for raising capital via online messaging and branding are not unlike those established by for-profit businesses who seek to obtain new consumers for their products. Non-profit environmental participants also struggled with measuring the estimated return-on-investment of social media participation for their organizations, similarly to the literature available on the perceived value of social media for for-profit organizations. As the same participant explained,

“We don’t have a good way of tracking like the actual conversions from [a social media campaign]. But hopefully moving forward with some better technology, we’ll be able to actually do conversation tracking... and you know, just kind of looking at it like how many people are actually seeing information about the campaign, and how many people actually submitted... our actual numbers, and how can we improve... and what will be more effective in the future” (Participant 32, international water protection organization with a budget over $13.5 million).

In order to best describe the perceived market value of non-profit environmental social media and discuss its relationship to social media audiences, it is necessary to define the primary actors and terminology. Nature 2.0 studies, which examine the activities, trends, and results of non-profit organizations, digital communications, and humanly-produced manifestations of the environment, lend a useful foundation for analysis which correspond to this research and its identified themes of the environment, value, participation, and perception. In the following sections, I will utilize terms supplied by nature 2.0 literature in order to outline and describe key themes observed in this research project between (i) non-profit environmental social messaging and online social media audiences, and (ii) non-profit environmental organizations and capital.
5.2.1.1 Non-Profit Environmental Social Media Audiences as Consumers

One useful definition for the creation and distribution of social media content is that of the ‘craft-consumer.’ According to Beer and Burrows (2010), it is possible to apply Campbell’s (2005) definition of the ‘craft-consumer’ to characterize at least some of the activities, productive involvement, and playfulness that participatory web audiences such as social media users might bring to acts of consumption (Beer and Burrows 2010, 4-5). According to Beer and Burrows (2010), Campbell’s definition of a ‘craft-consumer,’ or “one who participates in the production of what is consumed” (Beer and Burrows 2010, 4), is useful to studies of Web 2.0 architecture such as social media because it identifies the recent changes in the previously disparate, now frequently blended, roles of producer/consumer and draws new methods of consumption within participatory web cultures and society at large to attention (Beer and Burrows 2010, 4-6). According to Campbell (2005), craft-consumers are consumers who actively, as opposed to passively, tailor and consume products and ideas which they have modified to fit their own interests and identities (Campbell, 2005).

This definition is similarly applied to nature 2.0 studies in the work of Büscher (2014), where Buscher argues that web 2.0 architecture such as social media channels not only promote the “co-creation (Zwick et al., 2008) or prosumption” (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) of data, meaning that information and imagery relating to the environment is “not simply consumed, but actively modified or co-produced” (Büscher 2014, 728), but that such co-production enables supporters to “partly co-create the (information about) natures and conservation they want to ‘consume’” (Büscher 2014,
728), and involves further elements of “sharing, liking and linking” (Büscher 2014, 728) these co-created ‘products’ through social media, thereby exporting and endorsing a humanly co-created image, idea, and expectation of the environment which is consumed by other supporters (Büscher 2014).

Campbell’s (2005) craft-consumer, or Büscher’s (2014) co-creating supporter, is evidenced in this research project as the perceived or real social media audience of non-profit environmental organizations. Although this research did not investigate the motivations, preferences, or activities of participant organizations’ social media audiences themselves, these audiences’ motivations, preferences, and activities, were far from a one-sided exchange of ideas or methods, and were frequently cited by participants as being an integral component of creating and disseminating social media content and strategy as well as tracking and measuring the perceived impact or value of such communications.

As discussed in this project’s findings, along with the ‘best practices’ established by for-profit social media marketers, research participants were often very direct regarding the active role of their social media audiences and the importance of ‘social listening’ as primary influences on their social media content and strategy. For example, participants frequently cited preferences for using imagery, hashtags, messaging, and campaign materials that they believed to align with their audience’s preferences. Evidence of these preferences were often reinforced by social media metric data which indicated a prior post, action, or campaign’s “success,” or relative popularity, on their
social media channels. Another participant described that the organization “often adapt(s) our social content by what is currently happening and what people are latching onto” (Participant 1). Although the acknowledgement of such a reciprocal understanding between a content producer and consumer, in this case a non-profit environmental organization and their social media followers, may at first glance appear unrelated to the changing mechanics of capital and consumption described by Campbell’s (2005) craft-consumer, recent work in nature 2.0 studies serves to clarify and emphasize the significance of the relationship between co-produced content and commodification.

5.2.1.2 Methods of ‘Prosuming’ the Environment through Social Media

According to Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010, 14) prosumption “involves both production and consumption rather than focusing on either one (production) or the other (consumption).” Authors such as Büscher (2013; 2014; 2017), Büscher and Igoe (2013), Beer and Burrows (2010; 2013), Fletcher (2017), Lunstrom (2017), and Stinson (2017) have further extended this early definition of co-production and consumption to exemplify digital content created and shared by for-profit as well as non-profit organizations and their audiences through Web 2.0 architecture such as websites, social media channels, and mobile devices.

As opposed to solely the co-production and consumption of a material product manufactured between a provider and a consumer, this project’s findings are consistent with the characteristics of prosumption as defined in nature 2.0 literature, namely that such activities may also be defined (and often are) as the images, ideas, and proposed solutions for both the environment and environmental issues as a method of presenting
humanly-produced natures, commodifying digital artifacts, and capitalizing from their associated transactional data. Similar to Web 2.0 conservation projects identified by Büscher and Igoe (2013) and others, research participants described their social media audiences as participatory rather than passive, and despite owning diverse opinions on the established goals, metrics, or indicators of accomplishment with regards to social media, all research participants agreed that any degree of success required audience participation.

These findings support the idea that the production, dissemination, and success of participant organizations' social media was entirely dependent upon their audience submitting, sharing, ‘liking’, commenting on, or otherwise participating with organizational content. For example, several participant organizations ran image-based submission campaigns which asked audiences to send in their impressions and experiences with and in nature. Social media campaigns targeting specific environmental issues, animals, or landscapes were also often described as being “seasonal” in order to align with the perceived interest level of social media audiences, and social media efforts intended to draw attention to particular environmental issues, events, or actors were frequently dependent upon social media audiences expressed preferences for wildlife, ecosystems, content, timing, imagery, and tone.

While the participation of online audiences was required to co-create and disseminate organizational imaginings of the environment and associated solutions to environmental issues, these digital artifacts (in the forms of images, Facebook posts,
tweets, and others), were also directly and indirectly commodified by the process. In conversations with research participants, most social media managers discussed social media in the same terminology used and created by for-profit companies. This is likely linked to the fact that many used the same or similar resources and guidelines as for-profit organizations when planning for goals, creating social media content, or evaluating the success of their social media presence. Two main themes displaying the similarities of for-profit and non-profit environmental social media marketing became evident through the course of this research project (i) the perception of a direct relationship between social media marketing efforts and capital, or ‘return-on-investment,’ or (ii) the indirect financial benefit of establishing a positive ‘brand identity’ for actors by engaging with social media. These themes will be explored in greater detail below.

5.2.1.3 Financial Benefits of Social Media for Non-Profit Environmental Actors

As seen in this project’s findings, many research participants indicated that their primary indicator for success on social media was related to a calculable (or even currently incalculable, but nonetheless perceived), financial return-on-investment. This return-on-investment calculation was described as the measurable dollar value of the resources put into creating, sharing, and advertising social media content by many research participants, while others simplified the estimation into a more directly related cost-per-online-advertisement to either a fundraising dollar amount or other less calculable outcome, such as the signing of petitions or the submission, sharing, or other engagement with organizational content.
This commodification of digitally co-produced data was regularly described as the dominant metric of success on social media, even if they were not able to be calculated by a given organization. In cases such as these, the desire to achieve a strategy for measuring the return-on-investment for time put into social media content generation as a measure of the impact and value of financial investment was the ultimate goal. However, few organizations had established such a comprehensive evaluation formula, although they incorporated whatever elements possible, such as staff time, salary, metric measurement tools, advertising costs, and other considerations. These data, often presented alongside social media metric data displaying the organization’s social media followers and the number of ‘likes’, shares, comments, and contributions over a given period of time were sometimes presented to board members or even private for-profit businesses as evidence of organizational success and value. In some instances, this social media return-on-investment calculation was used (or intended as) an attraction for investment in either additional social media resources, private advertising dollars, or for-profit partnerships. In this way, even when social media audiences were not directly contributing a dollar from their bank accounts to the organization, their internet activity and co-created data was still supplying a monetary benefit to the organization.

In the most direct return-on-investment calculation between social media participation and success (and the most often identified by research participants), “school-building” or the “pipeline of engagement,” was measured against the cost of advertising on social media channels or fees charged for social media tools by research
participants. The ultimate goal expressed by these participants was to gain new members for the organization, thus ensuring new sources for funding as well as other methods of support, such as volunteering efforts and advocacy. Social media was frequently described as a low-barrier and the first point of engagement with potential new member donors for the organization. Though the “pipeline” or “ladder” differed somewhat between organizations, the ultimate goal of securing new financially-contributing members for the organization always began with first engaging social media content.

For instance, one participant described the goal of the “funnel of engagement” as an effort to “get in front of the people that might be our more passionate supporters and then converting them to people who might take an online action, or people who will go on one of our outings, or people who will eventually share our articles, and the ultimate goal is to get them to be a donor” (Participant 8, regional environmental protection and advocacy organization with a budget of under $3.5 million). However, another participant identified the same goal in addition to taking environmental action, while also expressing the common concern regarding the direct tracking of return-on-investment, stating, “I think our ultimate goal is to get some of those people to become donors, or maybe not donors, but take action… So that would be our goal, to get people to either take action or donate, but I don’t think we have a clear strategy for making that happen” (Participant 24, regional environmental protection and advocacy organization with a budget of between $3.5 million and $13.5 million).
5.2.1.4 Social Media and ‘Brand Identity’

One of the most often discussed forms of financial benefit to participant organizations was the desire to establish positive ‘brand identity’ by engaging with social media. The construction and preservation of an organizational ‘identity,’ especially online, is an important consideration for any number of reasons, but for the purposes of this section it will be examined in relation to the theme of value, in this case as a further indicator of social media prosumption and its associated commodification.

The ability to define and express a clear organizational identity was important to participants for a number of reasons. First, it allowed the organization to establish a positive reputation with their intended audiences. Second, the establishment of such an identity would enable the organization to be considered a “thought leader” or expert opinion in their area of focus. This positive opinion also served to build trust with an audience. Third, either due to their brand identity or an established reputation as a trusted leader in thought or practice, a positive brand identity would allow for increased attention, recommendations, online traffic, and as a result, an implied expected increase in both organizational membership and financial capital. However, research participants frequently cited the importance of maintaining a strong, positive, and uniform brand identity for reasons slightly different from those identified in solely for-profit communications. As one participant described,

“I worked at a brewery before, so it was... it was much more about like branding, you know? Like we’re not selling beer online, obviously. We’re kind of selling like a brand identity online, so the more the people that see it the better. Whereas it’s a little bit different with environmental work... You have so many layers. There are so many...hidden small details. It’s difficult to simply and make things easy to
understand. So when people really are engaging and asking questions and seeking out more information, that’s kind of how I view success for our digital channels” (Participant 32, international water protection organization with a budget over $13.5 million).

The benefits and potential negative drawbacks relating to online organizational identities were discussed and described in a number of different ways by research participants, but similarly to for-profit organizations, the importance of expressing a positive and knowledgeable presence was always paramount. Perhaps due to the current debates regarding social media, some participants also highlighted the importance of both avoiding controversy and maintaining a unified voice when posting on behalf of the organization. As social media content creation and participation was frequently undertaken by more than one individual in many of the organizations interviewed, it is possible that these answers would differ outside of a discussion of social media. However, the importance of a unified voice and maintaining organizational guidelines was repeatedly stressed by those participants who described such a focus.

5.3 Social Change and Social Media

Though many research participants did believe that there was a financial benefit to social media, social value was frequently highlighted as the primary benefit of their involvement in social media. This finding is in contrast to previous studies on the social media practices and activities of for-profit organizations, where significantly more research has been completed over the past several years. Non-profit environmental organizations occupy a unique position with regards to measuring the value of social
media campaigns, due to the fact that they endeavor to create social good as well as economic value (Bennett 2012; Büscher 2014; Waters et al. 2009). Similarly, the depictions, discourse, and actions of non-profit organizations have a unique capacity for influencing social change or creating material changes in landscapes and the environment (Auer 2011; Büscher 2014). As non-profit organizations and for-profit organizations have different goals, this section will describe the types of social value non-profit environmental workers attribute to social media participation.

5.3.1 Social Media as Social Good?
One key debate in the discussion of social media’s value overall has been the efficacy of social media as a tool for activism and advocacy. As the goal of this research project was to ascertain how non-profit environmental organizations perceive the value and efficacy of social media, this section will discuss how research participants conceptualized the social value of social media. The social value of social media has been the most emphasized aspect of social media literature in the field of geography to date, where case studies and analysis have been related to online social movements and collaborative activist networks (Büscher 2014; Carroll and Hackett 2006; Penney and Dadas 2013; Youmans and York 2012). However, these case studies do not discuss the motivations, goals, or definitions of success created by non-profit decision makers. In this research project, non-profit environmental organizations were asked about their perception of social media’s value. Similar to previous research, which supports the idea that the ‘success’ of social media participation often differ from case to case (Auer 2011; Boyd and Ellison 2007; Büscher 2014), participant responses
reflected a wide variety of opinions regarding social media’s efficacy for communicating, addressing, or solving environmental issues.

Conversations with organizational social media workers revealed that ‘awareness’ or ‘visibility’ was a central goal of many participants. Those participants who indicated a positive view of online activism and a focus on audience engagement as a goal for communicating with their social media audiences were among the most likely to indicate issue awareness and increased visibility as a successful outcome of their endeavors. However, research participants with primary goals related to advertising for events, fundraising, or reaching direct metric and advertising rates were less inclined to cite awareness as a preferred outcome. However, this difference does not necessarily imply that these organizations were less concerned with increasing awareness amongst their audiences, but it does seem to support the divergent perceptions of ‘value’ with regards to social media generally and as a tool for environmental activism.

Overall, research participants had very positive impressions of social media’s ability to positively impact their organization’s mission and goals. In general, many research participants were themselves conflicted over the positive or negative influence of web 2.0 technologies such as social media on environmental activism. While the majority did mention positive attributes, such as reaching a larger audience (Participant 8), low bar to entrance into the ‘pipeline of engagement’ (Participant 30), and increased involvement with environmental issues and activism (Participant 11), other negative
aspects of social media activism such as a “diffusion of responsibility” (Participant 1), low rates of efficacy with regards to petitions (Participant 9), and “anonymous,” unknown levels of support (Participant 13), were also mentioned in interviews. This finding is supported by previous literature on social media, which note that as technologies such as these are still new to society, collective action, and activism, there is little consensus on their efficacy and they, as well as their users and applied uses, are still evolving (Youmans and York 2012).

5.4 Discussion Summary

In this discussion, the three primary debates influencing this research project (i) space and social media, (ii) value and social media, and (iii) social change and social media, were discussed in relation to the social media perceptions and activities of non-profit environmental organizations. In terms of space and social media, I have found that research participants understood and interacted with virtual space in complex ways which involved multiple layers of location, scale, and perceptions of community. Research participants also conceptualized social media as both financial and socially valuable, though there was no standard method of determining the precise measurement of either.
6 Conclusions: Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research

This final section provides a conclusion for the overall research project and will review the theoretical contributions of the research by revisiting the initial research questions introduced in the first chapter of the thesis. Following this examination, the limitations of the research will be considered and directions for future research will be discussed.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis has investigated how environmental non-profit organizations establish goals, measure success, and perceive location with regards to social media. The identified research questions (1) How do environmental non-profit organizations use social media to advance their goals? (2) How do environmental non-profit organizations conceptualize success in social media? and (3) How do environmental non-profit organizations perceive the spatiality of social media? were considered when forming the methodology for this project, which involved semi-structured interviews with key informants working in social media on behalf of non-profit environmental organizations in the United States.

In order to respond to the first question, how do environmental non-profit organizations use social media to advance their goals? research participants were asked about their backgrounds, goals, influences, and expectations of social media participation at the organizational level. Responses to these questions revealed diverse backgrounds in the social media employees of environmental organizations and presented several distinctive approaches, perceptions, and methods with regards to
social media practices and participation. Further investigation into these findings led to the development of the discussion themes identified in the second and third research questions.

In order to respond to the second research question, *how do environmental non-profit organizations conceptualize success in social media?* research participants were asked about their perceptions of success as well as their methods and tools for analyzing this success. Responses to these questions revealed very different considerations and methods for determining success on social media. Further investigation into these findings revealed key themes which were organized into two sections. These themes, market and social value, incorporated a number of sub-themes regarding the influences, perceptions, and measurements for success on each scale. These findings and key themes reveal a number of new questions for potential research regarding the value of online activism, the prosumption of social media and other web 2.0 supported content, and the commodification of digital data.

In order to respond to the third research question, *how do environmental non-profit organizations perceive the spatiality of social media?* research participants were asked about their general impressions of social media, online activism, and any methods, tools, or content intended to target select, local, or global audiences. Responses to these questions revealed a diverse interest level and number of methods for targeting local to global audiences. Further investigation into these findings revealed that while non-profit environmental organizations do target audiences based upon their
locations with vastly different approaches, many of them understand and incorporate the concepts of location and scale in complex and often interconnected ways. This information is important because we are only beginning to understand the relationship between virtual and material geographies. Social media workers, such as these research participants, not only work within the confines of the digital environment, but they use this virtual space in order to create material changes to physical places, which may be local (to them) or global in nature.

6.2 Limitations of Study
Although the study did meet its identified objectives, there were some limitations which impacted its scope. The primary limitations of this study related to the short amount of time allotted for the collection of social media data, participant interviews, and the inability to collect data on the social media activities of non-profit environmental organizations from the audience’s perspective. Due to the timeline of the research project, participants could only be interviewed during the summer months. This resulted in difficulties with scheduling around planned vacations or scheduling out interviews with participants weeks in advance. Along with delays in communication due to staff contact forms or emails, the research timeline eliminated some potential participants and resulted in a smaller pool of organizations interviewed overall. Also, due to the short timeframe of the research project overall and the amount of time required to conduct interviews with participants, follow up interviews regarding organizational social media and content analyses of postings were not able to be conducted.
It should also be noted that the purposive sampling strategy method used relies on individuals and groups agreeing to participate in the research, thereby self-selecting. The process of self-selection has the potential to produce results that might not be representative of the entire population. Additionally, organizations with fewer resources, less of an online presence, or with no readily-discernible contact details were either not contacted or contact requests were delayed, which may have impacted a key informant’s willingness or ability to participate. The omission of such organizations and informants may have resulted in the exclusion of other perspectives. The size of the sample could have similar results on the research findings. As I interviewed only 38 staff members working with social media on behalf of 34 environmental non-profit organizations, and only 48.5% of the total organizations initially contacted, the results of this research may not be consistent with every non-profit environmental organization in the United States using social media. Similarly, due to the fact that I elected to sample only organizations operating in the United States and listed on CharityNavigator.org, the research findings should not be considered representative of all environmental non-profit organizations currently engaging with social media.

6.3 Future Research Directions
This research suggests a number of potential directions for the future of similar research. For instance, there are still many unexplored questions regarding the relationship between social media and the environment, the influence of non-profit organizations over social media audiences (as well as the influence of social media audiences over non-profit organizations), the processes of social media and the labor of
social media workers, and the relationship(s) between for-profit social media branding and non-profit organizations. It also remains to be seen if the tools, communications, and structure of social media are changing, or have the potential to change, the ways in which non-profit organizations themselves interact with the environment, and if so, how. For example, if social media and the behavior, preferences, or demographics of social media audiences have an impact on the types of issues non-profits engage with, or how strategies and even discourse around environmental issues might change due to the characteristics of the audience, communication method, or channel employed. Many of these lines of inquiry could also be applied to other non-profit organizations or across other groups engaging with social media. While additional social media content analysis would be useful in providing some answers to these questions, it is in itself an area for future analysis and research.

In order to investigate some of these subjects in the future, secondary interviews with each participant supported by a content analysis of organizational posts would be useful. The resulting data could be used to further inform questions related to social media’s use and perception by organizations and clarify the intent of particular posts or social media efforts. Without such follow up interviews, interpreting the precise motivations or desired result of specific social media content would be subjective on the part of the researcher. Interviews with social media audiences receiving and interacting with this content would also add depth to such inquiries. However, single session interviews with research participants were sufficient to respond to the research questions identified in this thesis.
In addition, the question of how geographers (and others) define and engage with virtual spaces remains. Although I only touched on this area briefly in this thesis, there are many potential directions to explore the relationships between space, social media, digital networks, and offline places. These relationships are complex, multi-faceted, and would benefit from both additional theoretical and applied studies in human geography. Interactions between online and offline spaces will likely continue to develop and change as technology advances and becomes even more embedded in our daily lives, experiences, communications, and communities. In order to further address these issues, we must continue to examine, explore, and question our contemporary relationships to space, place, and the internet.

For example, while social media channels are virtual spaces where non-profit environmental organizations can communicate, organize, and share ideas, images of the environment, and information about environmental issues, the virtual representations shared with and increasingly co-produced by online communities online do reflect offline, material places. The effects of online activity can potentially be seen at the national or global level in terms of policy or advocacy, in local neighborhoods, urban areas or rural communities. A beach cleanup, for instance, might be entirely organized online. However, although the beach is a physical, offline place that may only be accessible to a local community, it does not necessarily follow that only local community members assist in the removal of refuse. Virtual spaces and networks can enable support through online donations, supplies, word of mouth exchanges, or in other ways, such as the sharing of a Facebook post. However, each post, picture, or call to action
involves a media filter with multiple dynamics at play, including organizational goals and priorities, resources, social listening efforts, planned media campaigns, relationships with communities, other organizations, and the private and public sector. As the digital work that organization members perform online does reflect and support material places and ecosystems, the relationships between online space, offline places, and media could be examined in much greater detail.

Overall, research topics regarding the interactions between space, place, virtual, and offline environments are extremely scalable and can be related to the study of almost every phenomenon in modern human geography. In the words of Kinsley (2013a), the virtual world has now become so ingrained in both our daily lived experiences and our research that human geographers researching “any particular group or people or state of affairs will, at some point, encounter online activities" (540). As technology continues to advance and as more of our daily lives, communications, transactions, labor, and social interactions move online, it is likely that additional research directions will continue to present themselves.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Social Media Channels of Participant Organizations (Alphabetical)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media Channel</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>The most frequently used social media channel. Founded on February 4, 2004, Facebook now has over 1.5 billion monthly active users. For-profit businesses and non-profit organizations may also use Facebook’s advertisement and paid marketing features.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flickr</td>
<td>An online image and video channel which embeds photographs, often with captions and searchable hashtags. As with Facebook, users have both a personal profile that can be viewed by other users, and a page “feed” of other users or topics they have elected to follow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foursquare</td>
<td>A location-based mobile application which allows users to search for things to do in their area. The app allows users to view the activity of friends and other users, share reviews and recommendations, and supplies personalized recommendations based on a user’s previous visits to locations on the app or their search history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google+</td>
<td>Launched in 2011 to a limited number of users, Google+ is now open to anyone with a Google account. Primarily used for its photo and video editing tools, video chat support, and mobile messaging service, though Google continues to test new features.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>An image-based social media application that requires a mobile phone to create a profile and follow content. Instagram supports a number of photo editing tools and allows for users to create a personal profile, follow profiles of other users, post their own images, receive personalized recommendations for topics of interest (or individuals) to follow. Instagram also now supports paid advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Platform</td>
<td>Description</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>A social media channel used for professional networking. Users must create a profile in order to view resumes and content posted by other users. Similar to other social media channels, LinkedIn allows for content in the form of documents, links, and images to be shared with other users. Primarily used for networking, displaying business information, or industry-related job searches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinterest</td>
<td>A visual social media platform which allows users to save (or “pin”) content to their own boards, share content with other users, and engage with (or “follow”) other boards of interest to them. Primarily image based, Pinterest also tracks user interests and supplies personalized recommendations for trends, boards, or images to follow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reddit</td>
<td>Users create a profile in order to share links, text posts, and images. Unlike many other social media channels, users do not need a profile to view content, but must create one in order to engage with content or post themselves. Primarily used as a news-sharing or entertainment site. Users also engage with content by voting it up or down to increase its overall popularity on the site or its group pages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>A social media application that requires a mobile phone to create a profile, post images, and engage with other users. Snapchat videos (or “Snaps”) are limited to short clips and disappear after 24 hours. Users follow the “snaps” and stories (collections of snaps posted publically or within closed groups) of other users by following them directly or adding them as friends. Private messaging between users is also supported. Snapchat advertising is becoming more common amongst both small and large businesses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>Similar to Flickr, Tumblr allows users to post images and text posts to personal profiles and follow the activity and content of other users. However, Tumblr also supports video and audio posts. “Reblogging” (or sharing the content of other users) is encouraged and popular on the site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>A social networking channel which allows users to create their own profile and follow the content and activity of others through “tweets” (or text posts) limited to 140 characters. User profiles display only the last 3200 tweets of an individual user, and are</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Twitter</strong></td>
<td>frequently marked with clickable hashtags (#) that users can use to connect with and follow content. Twitter also supports “retweets” (shares with or without the addition of new text) and communication between users via tweets. Twitter marketing is popular amongst businesses and second only to Facebook advertisement services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>YouTube</strong></td>
<td>A video-based social media website that allows for users to post videos or watch content posted by others. YouTube supports advertisements as well as paid channels and ad-free subscriptions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: Organizations and Representatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Job Title(s) of Key Informant(s) Interviewed</th>
<th>Budget Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Community Coordinator</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Communications Associate</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Digital Media Associate</td>
<td>Group 3 ($13.5 million and above)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Online Organizer</td>
<td>Group 2 ($3.5 million to $13.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Senior Writer (AND) Digital Content Manager</td>
<td>Group 3 ($13.5 million and above)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Communications Director</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Communications Director (AND) Media Specialist</td>
<td>Group 2 ($3.5 million to $13.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Communications Manager</td>
<td>Group 2 ($3.5 million to $13.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Grants Coordinator</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Community Engagement Manager</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Director of Marketing and Events Coordinator</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Job Title</td>
<td>Group</td>
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<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Conservation Projects Coordinator</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Communications Director</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Communications Director</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Communications Manager</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Communications and Development Associate</td>
<td>Group 2 ($3.5 million to $13.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Marketing and Operations Manager (AND) Communications Assistant</td>
<td>Group 2 ($3.5 million to $13.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Director of Outreach</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Digital Content Editor and Strategist</td>
<td>Group 2 ($3.5 million to $13.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Director of Communication</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Communications Manager</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Public Outreach Coordinator</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Communications Manager</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Outreach Coordinator</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Director of Marketing Communications</td>
<td>Group 3 ($13.5 million and above)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Online Content and Communications Coordinator</td>
<td>Group 2 ($3.5 million to $13.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Communications and Special Events Coordinator</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Online Engagement Manager (AND) Social Media Coordinator</td>
<td>Group 3 ($13.5 million and above)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Senior Digital Strategist</td>
<td>Group 2 ($3.5 million to $13.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Communications Associate</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Communications Manager</td>
<td>Group 1 (Up to $3.5 million)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Interview Guide

Standard Sample Interview Questions
These sample questions were written to provide an outline for data collection during semi-structured interviews with key informants. They were guided by the research objectives and social media data. As is typical of semi-structured interviews, not every question was posed to every informant, nor were they asked in any particular order. These sample questions are indicative of the most frequent topics of conversation with key informants, though they often initiated many of these discussions themselves.

Introduction and General Organization Information:

Can you tell me a little about [organization] and your role and responsibilities within it?
- How long have you been doing that?
- Have you always had an interest in social media, or did you begin by working with [the organization]?

What platforms are you currently using? I see that you have (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, etc.)?
- Is there any reason you use these platforms specifically?

How do you manage social media in the organization?
- How many people are involved?
- What types of roles and responsibilities do they have?
- How is it structured (departments, teams, by platform, etc.)?
- Are they primarily paid positions or volunteers?

How important is social media to [your organization]? Why do you use it?
- Has the focus on social media for your organization changed in the past 5 years?

Does [organization] have a budget for social media (or is it incorporated with other areas)?
- What is it? How is it set? How is it used?
- Are you inhibited by your budget or do you have enough to do what you need to do?

Social Media: Perceptions and Goals

What are you looking to do with it? Do you have goals for social media?
- What is the goal of your social media (technical or general)?
- What does “awareness” mean to your organization?
- How do you know if it is effective?
- Do you measure it? How?

What do you think the benefits of social media are?

What are the biggest challenges (with regards to social media)?
- Has your opinion changed since working with social media (for either)?
Are online campaigns different from offline campaigns? How?
- Are online audiences for your organization different from offline audiences?
- Is the planning integrated with other organization objectives or separate?
- With regards to setting goals? Fundraising?

General Social Media: Training

Is there any kind of formal or informal training for social media in your organization?
- What type of training have you received (or have you done on your own)?
- What is training used for?

What types of materials do you (or the organization) use to learn about or inform social media?
- In-house materials, books, websites, blogs, publications, podcasts, conferences?
  - In house: Is that available online? Or would I be able to get a copy of that from you or someone in your organization?
  - Do these (materials or trainings) help you to plan social media or set goals?

Social Media: Planning

Can you tell me a little bit about how your social media is planned?
- What are the most important factors or influences for creating a specific social media action / campaign / etc?
  - How are topics or issues chosen?
    - What is the decision making process like?

Who is involved?
- How is the work of a social media distributed? One person? A team? What are their responsibilities like?

How long is the planning process? What is that like?

Social Media: Planning/Evaluation

Can you tell me a little about how you evaluate social media (if they do)?

Do you set goals or measurements/metrics for social media (or specific campaigns)?
- What are they? How are they set (past performance, metrics, etc.)?
  - Who sets them?
  - Does your social media presence support the overall goals of the organization?
  - Are your metrics tied to the same metrics the org uses to measure success?
  - What software do you use for analytics, if any?
  - Do you monitor discussions about your cause?
  - Is there a timeline?

How are goals monitored (if they are)?
- Are goals/campaigns adaptive?
- Do you usually see what you expect?
- How do you see the use of social changing in your organization over the next three or five years?
Social Media: Specific Examples and Follow Up Information

Is there anything that you’re working on now or have coming up in the next few weeks?
  - Can you tell me a little more about it?
  - **What is the goal (if there is one)?**
  - Are there offline elements?
  - Who are you hoping to reach?
  - Who is involved?
  - Is there a timeline?
  - Is it typical for your organization?
  - How is it going so far?