

# Strategic Communication for Non-Profit Organisations

Challenges and Alternative Approaches

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## Chapter 1

# Strategic communication in non-profit organisations: Challenges and alternative approaches

Evandro Oliveira, Ana Duarte Melo and  
Gisela Gonçalves

Communication in the public sphere as well as within organisational contexts has attracted the interest of researchers over the past century. Current forms of citizen engagement and community development, partly enabled through digital communication, have further enhanced the visibility and relevance of non-profit communication. These are performed by the civil society, which is “the organized expression of the values and interests of society” (Castells, 2008, p. 78), in the public sphere. Non-profit communication feeds the public sphere as “the discursive processes in a complex network of persons, institutionalised associations and organisations”, whereas those “discourses are a civilised way of disagreeing openly about essential matters of common concern” (Jensen, 2002).

Furthermore, by being deeply intertwined within civil society, non-profit communication provides alternative participative platforms to citizens and, by frequently emerging from grass root initiatives, it summons special conditions for discourse legitimacy, community engagement, ethical support and — what will not be an insignificant argument — as a practical response to problems where both the corporate, thus profit-centred, and the institutional structures are absent or have failed. Therefore, non-profit communication is set up as an alternative approach and recurrently referred as a driver to social change and development (Greenfield, 2016; Lane, 2016; Thomas, 2014; Wilkins *et al.*, 2014).

Despite its relevance in the public sphere, non-profit communication has been enduring efforts to be properly defined within communication research, whether in broad studies (Salamon & Anheier, 1997) or within a strategic mind frame (Andreasen & Kotler, 2008). Nevertheless, we register the rise of sub-fields, some of them already institutionalised within international academic organisations, like the sections *Communication and Democracy*, *Science and Environment Communication* as well as the working group *Communication and the European Public Sphere* at ECREA – European Communication Research and Education Association; *Community Communication*, *Participatory Communication Research* conjointly with the *Health Communication and Change* at IAMCR – International Association for Media and Communication Research and the *Environmental Communication*; *Health Communication* and *Global Communication and Social Change* sections at ICA – International Communication Association.

The aim of the present book is to offer an overview and report on Strategic Communication for Non-Profit-Organisations and the Challenges and Alternative Approaches. Considering the assumption that a key principle of strategic communication is the achievement of organisational goals, the majority of research developed in the field has used business environments to develop theories, models, empirical insights and case studies. Here, we make a step on the proposal of new approaches that are centred on the concept of non-profit in various dimensions and from various perspectives, showing the diversity and complexity around this subject and concurrently the need of further theoretical and empirical work that provides frameworks and also tools for further understanding of the phenomena.

We postulate that the distinctive element of what we call non-profit communication and its agglutinated factors is humanity and the relations with the fields of life in the public sphere, not mediated directly or subscribed on the first instance to the logics of an institutionalised organisation. Nevertheless, we also see that the specificity of the organisational form can have implications along with the communication setting. Still, we advance here the proposal for the inclusion of six sub-fields of study under the term Non-Profit Communication such as: (1) Development Communication, which addresses humanity on the way to democracy and social change,

(2) Civic Relations (Communication), as humanity defending and improving democracy; (3) Health Communication, concerning disease prevention, life extension and promoting health and wellbeing; (4) Environmental Communication; (5) Science and Innovation Communication; and (6) Religious Communication.

The concept of development communication is a “social process”, designed to seek a common understanding among all the participants of a change initiative, creating a basis for concerted action (Servaes, 2007: p. 14). Hamid considers the existence of three main aspects that comprehend this concept: 1) Communication for social Change and Media Development in which CfSC is the basis of media for development; 2) the need for empirical westernisation on the dimension of communication for social change; 3) the fact that diversity in society increases and approaches to CfSC as a main factor for social cohesion and social capital (Hamid, 2016).

The term Civic Relations has been defined by Oliveira (2016) as a social communicative function of an agent that performs direct or indirectly the civic exercise of pursuing and searching the common good. This agent can be engaged as an individual, into a group, a formal organisation, a movement, a network or other level and, by means of communication. It is involved on the process of the exercise of the political being, while discussing to reach consensus in the habermasian sense, but also in the performance dimension of the language as constitutive of the social reality and on the third dimension, as a symbolic interaction in the public sphere by driving and/or performing communication around the subject. (*ibid.*)

Health communication is one of the most established fields of non-profit communication with two dedicated journals – *The Journal Health Communication* since 1989 and the *Journal of Health Communication* after 1996. Kreps (2015) considers that two areas of health communication can be identified: Health care-focused communication research and health-promotion-focused communication research (p.1).

Environmental communication can be consider as “the pragmatic and constitutive vehicle for our understanding of the environment as well as our relationships to the natural world; it is the symbolic medium that we use in constructing environmental problems and negotiating society’s different responses to them” (Cox, 2010, p. 20). While advancing a need of innovation communication, Zerfass & Huck (2007) advocate three levels of facilitation: “On a *macro* level, it sparks the public debate about new ideas and tech-

nologies, thus enabling discussions and the construction of meanings within national and regional clusters” (...). On a *meso* level, institutionalized communication campaigns and programs are necessary to create an understanding of innovations in interactions of organisations with relevant stakeholders. (...) On a *micro* level, each manager can contribute to innovations by mediating meaning in asymmetrical social relations” (Zerfass & Huck, 2007, p. 111).

Religious communication can be noted within the frame and distinctive elements that “is metaphorical, irreducible to any non-figurative form of expression, and identifies metaphysical referents that can be apprehended but no defined” (Lessl, 1993, p. 127).

These sub-fields of thematic communication within non-profit communication are also performed and driven through various collective actors in society like NGOs, associations, churches, foundations, social movements, single-issue organisations, unions and even public organisations. Researching these six sub-fields includes specific challenges and requires modified categories compared to profit-making or political organisations. Hence, alternative approaches to value creation had to be developed which are not aimed at economic profits, but rather oriented towards goals such as public welfare, societal and humanity values, and religious ideas. These alternatives cannot be overseen and represent the core of non-profit communication within organisations. To elaborate on this, we advance the concepts of the intermediary or bridging role of organisations from Carroll (1992) and the communities of interpretation (Berger & Luckmann, 1995) as a communicative social function. Both can be useful as a framework for further understanding the dynamics of collective actors in the six sub-fields, apart from their own organisational needs and specificities.

This particular book focuses on the role of strategy. Strategic communication can be defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission” (Hallahan *et al*, 2007, p. 3), when considered as a functionalist approach. But we can expand this definition if we consider the strategic game situation of the communication (Pérez, 2001), the performativity and emerging dimension of the language (e.g Weick *et al*, 2005), or other approaches that are more towards a complex perspective. We firmly consider that this diversity of approaches is present along this book, which is divided into four main parts. In the Part I, we collect con-

ceptual proposals and best practices for the field; In Part II, NGOs are on the focus of the chapters. Religious organisations strategic communication and organisational identities constitute the Part III and the Part IV presents three case studies that report on empirical research on the field of non-profit communication.

Public Interest Communication as a discipline is the proposal of Jasper Fessmann from the University of Florida. He argues that Public Interest Communication is connected with the Public Relations Scholarship and has influences from sociology, marketing, psychology. He describes its proposals and draws a list of arguments and elements on which is based, reporting on already existing events and research, including institutionalisation efforts.

Markus Wiesenberg and Evandro Oliveira, from the University of Leipzig, address the question of legitimacy in two organisational forms from the third sector – NGOs and Churches, proposing a conceptual model that looks at four dynamics of legitimation, grounded on theoretical pillars of legitimacy and legitimation; social theory like the structuration theory, post-modernity and Searle's understanding of collective action; but also definitions of public sphere, public interest, strategic communication and communication management.

Public Health and the role of strategic communication in the theory and practice of this impactful field of non-profit communication is approached by Ana Duarte Melo, Sara Balonas, Teresa Ruão from the University of Minho and Manuela Felício from the North Regional Health Administration, in Portugal. They share the experience and challenges of a visionary research-action program that combines training and consultancy in order to empower public health professionals through strategic communicative skills.

In the second part of this book NGO's communicational modus operandi, its strategies and specificities are highlighted, scrutinised and discussed.

Anke Wonneberger, from the University of Amsterdam, proposes a journey through the challenges set out by the political institutionalisation of "Environmental Non-Profit Organisations in Public Discourses" indicating that this constitutes an opportunity for the public legitimacy of movement organisations.

Greenpeace Germany lobbying strategies analysis and the impact of digitalisation of public affairs campaigns are at the core of the work of Felix Krebber, Christian Biederstaedt & Ansgar Zerfaß, from the University of Leipzig. In “Online campaigning and offline lobbying: Public Affairs Strategies of Greenpeace Germany” the authors point out that although digitalisation increases the range of influence, traditional lobbying is still crucial to non-profit organisations.

Louise Van Dyk, from the University of South Africa, addresses the central relationship between non-profit organisations and corporate donors, frequently a fundamental source for their survival. Control, trust, commitment and satisfaction dimensions are observed through the donors perspective in “Perceptions from the bottom up: Relationships between non-profit organisations and their corporate donors” providing valuable insights to non-profit stakeholders’ managers.

“Audiovisual narrative in the advertising strategy and creativity of NGOs”, by Rafael Marfil-Carmona, Isidoro Arroyo-Almaraz & Francisco García-García of the Universities of Granada, Rey Juan Carlos and Complutense of Madrid, provide an approach to NGO’s storytelling through the content analyses of “Manos Unidas” and UNICEF in Spain. Although the interactive potential of the digital is still being explored, the authors observe a shift from the advertising campaign paradigm to the development of an active storytelling based on truthfulness and objectivity in portraying human drama.

Chapters gathered in section III present a way of understanding “Religious Organisations” strategic communication singularities and contemporary challenges. Sara Balonas, from the University of Minho (Portugal), develops a case study focused on an innovative internal communication strategy developed by the Catholic Church in order to implement an effective vocational programme: the Vocational Pastoral Teams Kit. With this strategy it is stressed the role of internal members as actors in the legitimacy process of the Church in its communities.

The construction of the Muslim identity on the Web is central to the chapter authored by Billur Ülger (Yeditepe University, Turkey) and Gürdal Ülger (Maltepe University, Turkey). By analysing the case of the Presidency of the Religious Affairs in the light of Cheney’s (1983) identity strategies, they reflect about how the religious organisations tend to construct identity through discourses, practices, communities, and structures just as companies do.

The IV and last part of this book presents case studies from different European non-governmental and non-profit organisations. In “Public Information and Communication for Public Participation in Spain”, Alejandro Alvarez (Universidad Católica de Córdoba, Argentina) and Isabel Ruiz (Sheffield Hallam University, England) analyse the official websites of local governments in Spain to ascertain which communicative practices could boost citizen’s participation. To achieve this objective, an innovative geographical e-tool – “The Infoparticip@ Map”, is presented as a way to motivate governments to make improvements in transparency and citizens’ engagement.

In the following chapter, civic engagement and digital media continues to be at the centre of attention of Bruno Asdourian and Virginie Zimmerli, from the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). These researchers try to answer to “How important is civic engagement for public transportation communication?” by analysing a cultural context of civic engagement as well as a communicational model between the players enrolled in democratic exchanges taking place in an open data environment, in the specific case of the company Transports Publics Genevois (TPG).

Finally, the communication strategies of the European Journalism Observatory (EJO) – a consortium of 14 non-profit media research institutes from 11 European countries – is analysed by Marcus Bardus, from the American University of Beirut and Philippo di Salvo, from the Università della Svizzera italiana. In “Leveraging the power of social media to enhance internal and external communication”, the author shows how the communication strategies were developed through an iterative, shared decision-making process, aiming to improve the public visibility of the network and the efficiency of internal communication fluxes, especially using social networking sites and Web 2.0 applications.

Emergent versions of some of the chapters included in this volume were presented at the conference hosted at the University of Leipzig, in December 2015, under the theme: “Strategic Communication for Non Profit Organisations: Challenges and Alternative Approaches”. This conference was an event of the Organisational and Strategic Communication Section of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and was hosted by the Chair in Strategic Communication at the Institute of Communication and Media Studies, University of Leipzig, with the support of NAPROK – Young German Scholars in Public Relations and Or-

organisational Communication. Organised and hosted by Evandro Oliveira this event included more than 15 presentations and gathered around 200 participants during two days. We believe that the double-blind peer reviewed chapters presented in this volume share critical reflections and also keep alive the debate initiated in the Leipzig conference. Thank you to all authors, reviewers and thoughtful critics without whose contributions this book would not have been possible.

The editors,  
Evandro Oliveira, Ana Duarte Melo, Gisela Gonçalves

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