



Strategic Social Media Management for NGOs

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Abstract

Social media channels provide intriguing opportunities for NGOs to communicate with their audiences, raise awareness, and campaign for change. Maintaining strong social media communication that supports the organization's ability to achieve its goals is the mandate of social media management, the day-to-day maintenance and management of an organization's social media channels and communication. This chapter provides an overview of the potential, practice, process, methods, and tools of effective social media management, including strategic planning based on formative research, implementation and communication, as well as evaluation.

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Introduction

When the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge started in 2014, few would have thought that the campaign would end up raising more than \$115 million (Sample and Woolf 2016) to fund research for a cure and support for those living with the disease. Those who accepted the challenge donated to the cause, poured a bucket of ice water over their heads, and shared a video of the spectacle on their social media accounts while challenging their friends to do the same. As social media users, including high-profile persons like George W. Bush, Heidi Klum, or Leonardo DiCaprio, challenged each other, they shared more than 2.2 million videos (Steel 2014). With this simple and cost-effective strategy, the campaign took advantage of the unique features of social media and traversed individual networks to raise awareness and funds.

Social media are commonly defined as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 61). They bring intriguing opportunities for NGOs. At the onset of 2018, approximately 3 billion people used social media worldwide, an increase of 13% compared to the previous year. While the percentage of users varies widely by country and continent, social media accounts continue to increase globally (WeAreSocial 2018).

Differently from traditional channels, “social media [...] has made the ability to comment, respond, share, critique, change and add to information possible on a broad scale” (Pridmore et al. 2013). With large numbers of active users, social media platforms can thus enable even small organizations with little budgets to reach stakeholders across the world, raise awareness for issues, fundraise, recruit volunteers, and share information quickly, among others. What’s more, social media allow for immediate two-way communication, thus providing opportunities for organizations to build and maintain strong relationships with stakeholders and seek their input (see Saffer et al. 2013; Saxton and Waters 2014).

At the same time, social media networks also pose managerial and communicative challenges. Organizations need to implement new processes and divert resources to their social media communication within digital environments where information can spread rapidly and widely. Organizations are often used to high levels of control over content shared via traditional channels like newsletter, press releases, flyers, or read-only websites. Control, however, is shared on social media platforms, which evolved around Web 2.0 principles of sharing, participating, and collaborating (see Constantinidis and Fountain 2008; Kietzmann et al. 2011; Trunfio and Lucia 2016). Thus, when even small social media blunders may impact the organization’s reputation and any user can share criticism and information, social media communication requires thoughtful and professional management.

In response, social media management has emerged as a sophisticated organizational function (Torning et al. 2015) and “the collaborative process of using Web 2.0 platforms and tools to accomplish desired organizational objectives” (Montalvo 2016, p. 91). It is commonly located within an organization’s integrated communication function, which may include public relations, marketing, and internal communication, among others. As a strategic practice, social media management includes planning based on research and listening, implementation and communication, and evaluation. In addition, it requires everyday monitoring and maintenance of social media communication with the organization’s stakeholders (Kim 2016).

This chapter provides an introduction to the strategic social media management process with a particular focus on NGOs, which include “private, not-for-profit organizations that aim to serve particular societal interests by focusing advocacy and/or operational efforts on social, political and economic goals, including equity, health, environmental protection and human rights” (Teegen et al. 2004). We first provide an overview of NGO communication and social media. Subsequently, we lay out key steps of a social media process that may guide organizations when planning and implementing their social media communication.

Social-Mediated Communication: What’s in It for NGOs?

Long before social networking sites became mainstream, scholars argued the potential of the Internet as a “potential equalizer” (Coombs 1998, p. 289), allowing activists (and advocacy groups) greater access to power resources in an effort to influence change in business practice. Limited access to power resources, i.e., “the number of followers, favorable media coverage, public support, money, and political champions,” explained, in large part, why activists (and NGOs, more broadly) were considered secondary stakeholders (Coombs 1998, p. 291).

Social media have considerably altered this power relation, making it easier for NGOs to challenge and expose unethical and socially irresponsible business practices (Coombs and Holladay 2015). Oft-cited examples include the Greenpeace campaign against Shell’s plans to drill in the Arctic and the now-classic Greenpeace challenge to Nestle’s palm oil sourcing practices. In these and other cases, social media provide previously marginalized stakeholders such as NGOs a platform to make themselves salient and visible. By posing a threat to corporate reputation, an intangible organizational asset, social-mediated communication has potentially altered NGO-corporate communication and relationships.

Aside from digital activism, social media open up new avenues for NGOs to engage with their stakeholders and supporters. A survey of nearly 5000 global NGOs reports a growing digital presence on social networking sites such as Facebook (92%), Twitter (72%), YouTube (55%), LinkedIn (51%), and Instagram (39%) (27 Stats 2017). Such communication may take the form of raising awareness, providing information, engaging in dialogic communication, fundraising, and/or mobilizing support for specific causes. Current research finds that, thus far, most NGOs use social media in conventional ways; purely to disseminate information and

as a form of one-way communication on focal issues and/or campaigns. Most studies of NGO communication on Facebook and Twitter find limited use of the dialogic and interactive capabilities that are unique affordances of social media (Waters et al. 2009; Waters and Jamal 2011). There are exceptions. For instance, a study found that the American Red Cross uses a variety of tools such as websites, blogs, Twitter, and Facebook to recruit and maintain volunteers, update the community on disaster preparedness and response, and engage the media (Briones et al. 2011). Even when there is recognition to use social media to build relationships with primary publics, efforts may be impeded by the lack of time, knowledge, or dedicated personnel (Ibid).

On the other hand, there is more optimism about the potential to mobilize, connect, and build community especially during humanitarian crises. As a case in point, crowdsourcing for disaster relief and humanitarian crises has been on the rise. Following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the explosion of content on social media and mobile messaging landed the Red Cross \$8 million in donations via text messaging in under 48 hours (Gao et al. 2011). Social enterprises such as Ushahidi provide open-source tools, crowdmaps, and crowdsourcing platforms to reach marginalized populations and have, since its inception in 2008, reached 25 million people in crises across the globe. Real-time and far-reaching status updates, photo sharing, tweets and retweets, and mobilization of networks in times of crisis amplify recovery and aid efforts (Giridharas 2010). Social media also played a vital role in the campaign to secure the release of Chibok girls in Nigeria. Triggered by a grassroots campaign #BringBackOurGirls, the issue garnered worldwide attention of the abductions by Boko Haram and increased pressure on the Nigerian government to escalate efforts to secure the girls' release (Bring Back Our Girls' Rights 2015).

These illustrative cases do not suggest an unqualified position about some inherent power of social media; rather, they are situated in a larger debate about the potential of social media to foster digital engagement. Critics contend that online support ("Likes") for social causes are manifestations of slacktivism and/or arm-chair activism with no substantive offline impact. Proponents, on the other hand, provide evidence for online behavior being a springboard for engagement, moving individuals from "'knowing' to 'doing'" and possibly even reinforcing offline behavior (Mano 2014, p. 292). The Cone Communications Digital Activism Study (2014) highlights several positive developments. First, liking or following organizations on social media is not an end in itself but a "gateway to further participation." Second, donations are more likely to be made online as opposed to offline. Third, compelling content, urgency and relevance of an issue, and ease of participation drive engagement. Fourth, social media demands that organizations tailor their messages and networks to specific audiences. This implies that NGOs need to understand the motivations and usage habits of their constituents if they are to effectively use digital networks.

Despite the optimism, two points merit attention. Contextual differences are decisive in determining the relative power of NGOs as well as the outcomes of social-mediated communication. A recent report found that NGOs in developing nations lag behind their Western counterparts in the optimal use of the Internet and

social platforms because “the economic and political factors and the quality of Internet infrastructure in each region affects how NGOs use these tools and how donors in each region respond to them” (Morrison 2016). NGOs are also constrained in their ability to effectively deploy social media for fundraising because of lack of dedicated personnel and the reliance on volunteers for day-to-day operations.

Second, it is naïve to view social media as separate from or supplanting traditional forms of NGO communication, be it email, petitions, or offline activism. Scholars have hypothesized that the impetus toward and adoption of social media in NGOs is contingent on organizational strategy (i.e., what strategic approaches does the NGO deploy in fulfilling its social mission), governance (e.g., membership structure, board size), and environmental considerations such that NGOs that depend on or face high pressure from external constituents may be more likely to adopt social media (Nah and Saxton 2012). There is, as yet, limited research to treat these variables as complete or universal; however, the argument that social media be treated as an integral component of overall organizational strategy remains valid.

Together, these tools are part of the strategic communication effort of any organization. For all organization types, whether commercial or nonprofit, a clear understanding of how social media fit with business and communication strategy is a key starting point. Clarity on goals is the precursor to tailoring the tactical choices (e.g., what networks to use, developing a content strategy, etcetera) to the appropriate target audience. Social media are an amplifier, as noted by a WWF executive, “I see our web site as our home base, the blog as our podium and Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and LinkedIn as our mega phone [...] provides us with the opportunity to mobilize thousands more people [...]” (Catone 2009), not a substitute for conventional channels.

A Social Media Management Process

Developing a Social Media Strategy

It is tempting for organizations to jump into social media as it only takes a few minutes to start a free page or profile on multiple platforms. Maintaining and implementing effective social media communication, however, takes time, commitment, and knowledge. Just as other areas of organizational operations, it should be informed by sound strategy.

Most basically, a social media strategy outlines how social media goals should be reached so that resources can be used effectively to help the organization fulfill its mission (see Clappitt 2018). It thus provides direction for the organization’s social media management as it informs the development and implementation of specific social media tactics, including messages and content, among others (Kim 2016). Doing so, strategy also helps maintain consistency, for instance, when the team faces turnover or crises (Clappitt 2018).

Before developing a strategic social media plan, which provides a guiding framework for the organization’s social media activities, the organization should

gather and consider information on several dimensions (see Clampitt 2018; Kim 2016). First, social media management needs to contribute to the organization's overall mission, vision, and goals (Kim 2016). Second, it cannot stand isolated but needs to be planned as an integral part of the organization's overall strategic communication function. It thus ideally works in concert with other on- and offline communication tactics so that they can enhance each other.

Third, while the social media landscape is diverse, organizations do not have to be active on every platform. The selection should rather be based on the platforms' appropriateness (for instance, its users, reach, features, and norms) for the organization's social media plan as each platform provides unique features and opportunities to reach different types of audiences (Clampitt 2018). With over 2 billion active user accounts, Facebook, for instance, remains the most visited social network and attracts people of almost all ages who share a wide variety of content and information. In comparison, LinkedIn has only 260 million active accounts and a strong focus on business and career-related content. And while Qzone is hardly known in many parts of the world, it is one of the most popular social media platforms in China (WeareSocial 2018). Because social media are vibrant and constantly developing, the social media team should further monitor and evaluate changing features and policies, shifts in characteristics of users, as well as emerging platforms.

Fourth, social media management should be tailored toward defined audiences and organizational stakeholders. It is thus important to know how they use social media, what they expect from the organization, and how they might best be reached, among others (Clampitt 2018). This also includes considering different patterns of social media use in different parts of the world. Finally, the organization needs to consider its available resources (for instance, staff, budget, skills, and technology), existing social media presence, as well as its strengths and weaknesses before developing a strategic social media plan (Kim 2016).

Based on the analyzed background information, Kim (2016) suggests that organizations proceed by developing social media goals, vision statements, and objectives (see Fig. 1). Social media goals are general statements about what the organization ultimately wants to accomplish with its social media activities. At this stage, target audiences should also be defined (Kim 2016). A nonprofit organization, for example, may want to be widely known as a trusted source of support for victims of sexual abuse among Millennials. An activist group may want to gain public support for its advocacy to change a law while maintaining strong bonds with its supporters and members. A disaster relief organization may set enhancing transparency with donors and volunteers as a social media goal.

Vision statements then require the careful selection of social media platforms as they summarize the specific function and value of each platform in the pursuit of the social media goal(s) (Kim 2016). Clampitt (2018) suggests thinking about these statements as "platform job descriptions" (p. 84), which define specific duties. While the activities on each platform should be consistent and enhance each other, they may play quite different roles and focus on different target audiences. Doing so, the unique capabilities of each platform for sharing and presenting content and engaging audiences should be considered (Clampitt 2018; Kim 2016). What's more, an



Fig. 1 Structure of a strategic social media plan (Visualization based on Kim’s (2015) model)

organization may decide to consider personal accounts of organizational members as part of its strategy and/or operate multiple accounts on one platform. Multiple accounts can be effective and necessary when the organization is large and has a variety of organizational units and functions that require their own social media representation. UNICEF, for instance, operates dozens of twitter accounts for its units in different countries as well as multiple pages and groups on Facebook. A large number of different profiles, however, also increases the resources needed, may dilute a clearly defined social media presence, and poses high demands on consistency and coordination.

Vision statements for the selected platforms (and profiles) should specify the channel’s purpose for the defined audience. The disaster relief organization aiming to increase transparency may, for instance, want to use Facebook for sharing insights into the organization’s governance process and facilitate discussions about current issues (for instance, by live-streaming executive board meetings or hosting Q&A sessions with leadership) with donors and volunteers. Instagram, a platform that focuses on sharing pictures, short videos, and gifs, could be used to engage audiences via photos of successful projects and behind-the-scenes impressions, while Twitter may primarily function as a news channel to share information about current developments.

Finally, the social media team can set specific objectives for each channel (Kim 2016). Objectives establish specific targets as a base for evaluation and “facilitate communication planning” (Hallahan 2015, p. 251) by defining desired lower-level outcomes and outputs that will lead to achieving higher-level goals (see Hallahan 2015; Kim 2016). While output objectives focus on the quantity and quality of the social media team’s posts, content, and activities, outcome objectives set targets for actual results (Kim 2016). The latter commonly aim to affect change in behavior, which also requires change in awareness and attitudes (Hallahan 2015). An

organization may, for instance, want to mobilize a certain number of people to participate in a protest against hydraulic fracturing (behavior), which requires change or reinforcement of opinions (attitude) about the practice as well as knowledge about the process and environmental impacts (awareness). While the organization can control its outputs, but not its stakeholders and audiences, a strong social media strategy will balance output and outcome objectives, so that outputs are directed toward achieving outcomes (Kim 2016).

As for most strategic communication efforts, social media managers commonly define objectives following the SMART model (see Hallahan 2015; Kim 2016; Lipschultz 2017). SMART objectives are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely. Strong objectives (see Fig. 2) thus avoid any vagueness, set a measurable target to clearly establish success or failure, are realistic, relevant to the organization's mission, and include a timeframe. Together, the social media goals, vision statements, and specific objectives outline the strategic orientation that can be translated creatively into lower-level strategies (for instance, we will recruit more followers by having a contest) and tactics (the actual social media communication and activities).

Social Media Communication: From Strategy to Implementation

In formulating communication strategy, social media goals should be aligned with organizational objectives. Doing so offers a pathway for implementation and evaluation (more on this in the next section). Sinek (2009) contends that the most inspiring organizations and leaders “Start with Why” – the *raison d’être* and core purpose – that, in turn, defines the “how” (processes and tools to realize the goal) and “what” (results and outcomes of the goal) of organizational actions. By no means specific or limited to particular forms of media, Sinek’s claim resonates with the idea that understanding social media should go beyond knowledge of tools and technical specifications to a broad-based appreciation of their affordances and the possibilities they create for organizational communication (Kaul and Chaudhri 2017).

Having established a clear understanding of goals – whether fundraising, engagement, growing the subscriber base, recruiting volunteers, increasing brand awareness, and the like – organizations can move from strategy to implementation. Although there is no “one size fits all,” there are factors to consider in implementing social media strategy.

Listen, Scan, and Monitor

Social listening is a vital yet often ignored effort in flagging potential issues that could threaten an organization’s reputation, if left unchecked. Issues management through social listening is a valuable source of information on the conversations and topics that pertain to an organization (for a difference between social listening and monitoring, see Jackson 2017). Social listening can also help categorize and prioritize organizational stakeholders relative to their importance and position on specific issues and tailor communication strategies to appropriately deal with each group, for



Fig. 2 Examples of SMART output and outcome objectives

instance, leverage supporters and make an effort to address the negative opinion of problematic stakeholders.

Scanning for posts that mention the organization further allows for identifying content the organization can engage with or needs to respond to. It can indeed be challenging to determine which mentions merit a response and which ones do not. The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR [n.d.](#)) suggests that social media teams categorize posts according to the stones, pebbles, and sand principle. Informed by the organization's goals and objectives, posts should be sorted based on whether they require immediate action (stones), can be dealt with later (pebbles), or don't require a response (sand).

Sorting through the mentions of the organization and other relevant categories, the social media team also functions as a "boundary spanner" (see Gregory [2016](#)) who brings issues relevant to external stakeholders to the attention of leadership in the organization. In this way, monitoring and social listening also help detect emergent challenges and assist with crisis preparedness. Additionally, data and insights gained through social listening can be an invaluable source of knowledge for content creation, idea generation, and campaign focus. Hootsuite, Social Mention, Sprout Social, and Google Alerts are a few of the available tools for social listening and tracking conversations.

Select Platforms Based on Goals and Target Audience

Not all social media are created equal; instead, they offer differentiated functionalities. As an illustration, the honeycomb model of social media outlines seven constructs or building blocks (identity, presence, relationships, conversations, groups, reputations, and sharing) that, in some combination, constitute the defining features of each platform (see Kietzmann et al. [2012](#)). Per this model, "relationships" and "sharing" are the primary building blocks of Facebook and YouTube, respectively, whereas "identity" is core to LinkedIn followed by "reputation" and

“relationships.” With knowledge of primary and secondary functionalities, organizations can implement informed tactics of engagement to leverage the affordances of each platform. Relatedly, all organizations need to be judicious about their digital footprint although NGOs, in particular, may have limited resources, time, and effort to cast a wide net on social media. Moreover, simply having a Facebook page or a Twitter account is not enough; these need to be regularly updated, monitored, and incorporate engaging content consistent with strategic goals and the defining features and norms on each platform.

Create Opportunities for Engagement

Contrary to the static architecture of Web 1.0, social media offer dynamic opportunities for real-time, two-way communication between an organization and its audiences. Interactive features (such as likes, shares, and comments), virtual dialogues, and visual storytelling dramatically alter relational and communicative possibilities. Realizing these benefits, however, can be an uphill task for many organizations.

For one, audiences differ widely in their motivations to engage with organizations. Whereas those that are highly aware, interested, and personally affected by an issue might be more inclined to participate in reciprocal communication, extant scholarship also notes that priorities and behaviors may change over time and latent groups may become salient (see Grunig 1997). Likewise, engagement is not a magic bullet but a process that requires incremental effort. Social engagement, then, may be conceptualized as a ladder starting with awareness and building up to interest, interaction, engagement, and, finally, evangelization. Through a series of progressive actions, this form of digital organizing cultivates “casual supporters into advocates and donors” (Schossow 2014). Barack Obama’s election campaign is an illustrative case that started with a simple ask (friending or liking a Facebook page); once campaigners secured a “foot in the door,” they could target followers with status updates and specific tasks (e.g., signing a birthday card). With user data and opt-ins, the campaign opened avenues for conversation and furthering the relationship (e.g., actions such as signing an issue-specific petition or making a small donation). At the very top rung, the campaign could comfortably ask supporters for bigger donations, time for voluntary work, and advocacy among friends and networks, etcetera (Ibid).

Creating Content that Connects

There is no dearth of advice on creating social media content that is compelling, unique, authentic, surprising, grabs attention, and tells a good story. Using the power of social media, The Dutch Alzheimer’s Foundation launched a creative Facebook campaign to “mobilize younger people in the fight against dementia” by letting them experience what patients of the disease go through on a daily basis (The Alzheimer’s Event n.d.). The idea was simple: starting with 100 Dutch influencers, people were invited to upload an image of a friend on the campaign website (<http://hetalzheimerevent.nl/>). The photos were digitally manipulated and, using Facebook functionalities such as photos and tagging, the altered photo was placed in a non-existing event and the participant notified. Participants could tag their friends in the photo, which appeared on the friends’ timeline with a simple message that drove the point

home, “Confusing right? You are now experiencing what it’s like to have Alzheimer’s disease.” The novel approach and a simple yet powerful message went viral as more people passed on the message and posted images to get their friends to “experience ‘the Alzheimer’s effect’.” Notably, the campaign reached 2,450,000 people only via blogs, news sites, and Twitter, and over 200,000 people experienced the Alzheimer Event directly or via a tagged friend. Indeed, there are many examples to learn from, and storytelling to forge emotional connections is perhaps an unquestioned “truth” in the digital age. As NGOs compete for attention, funds, and followers in a competitive landscape, they confront the challenge of telling their stories in a unique and distinctive manner.

Content creation, however, is more complex than simply telling a good story, as difficult as storytelling is. Empirical studies indicate that virality in social media is driven by several factors. According to Mill’s (2012) SPIN framework, for instance, four key variables make virality more likely; viral content has to be likable and sharable (spreadability), easy to redistribute (propagativity), run on multiple social media platforms (integration), and “successively reinforced by virtue of sequentially releasing units of viral content” (p. 168) (nexus).

Social media managers also need to know what works from a stakeholder standpoint. A study of online reactions to NGO communication (Gregory and Richard 2014) attests to the complexity of content creation, which aims to further engagement through likes, comments, and shares. In this study, the public responded positively to all types of messages from nonprofits, including information-sharing, promotion, mobilization, and community-building. Actual engagement, however, differed significantly by message type. Community-building messages, for instance, prompted the highest number of comments, confirming a preference for dialogic forms of communication over information dissemination. Simultaneously, call-to-action messaging garnered the maximum number of likes. Ironically, however, the messages that are most likely to be shared are one-way informational updates, especially if they include photo statuses. This leads the authors to posit that “individuals will share information about nonprofits, but they are not actively encouraging their networks to participate by sharing information about fundraising, events, or calls to action” (p. 294).

In practical terms, organizations need to have realistic expectations and create content that is best suited to specific goals. By creating a social media calendar, organizations can plan and map periodic social media activity (e.g., tweets, Facebook posts, blog posts, videos, etcetera) across networks and ensure alignment with other marketing activities across the organization. Even with the planning, though, emergent issues require organizations to be adaptive and flexible, a defining paradox of the digital age.

Rules of Engagement and Social Media Governance

Irresponsible social media usage can prompt serious “social media fails.” Preventing, or at least anticipating, these missteps and managing them is contextual – albeit guiding principles may come in handy. Among the first rules of engagement are maintaining a pleasant tone of voice, being responsive, and open to (especially

critical) feedback. Censorship in social media can threaten its participatory and open nature and can even undermine organizational reputation.

As organizations negotiate the loss of control in the digital age, they turn to social media guidelines and policies as a mechanism for governance. Along with training programs, “formal and informal frameworks which regulate the actions of the members of an organization within the social web” (Macnamara and Zerfass 2012, p. 302) allow organizations to discipline employee use of social media in order to mitigate potential reputational, legal, and operational risks and offer a semblance of control. Most policies highlight rules of etiquette and engagement consistent with brand values, clear identification of authorship, and issues of confidentiality and privacy. They can run from one page to multiple pages of content. Most policies recognize that employees are representatives of the organization and, as brand ambassadors, they assume a powerful position as reputation agents (Rokka et al. 2014). Thus, their actions can hurt or help their employer (Opitz et al. 2018). In light of blurring boundaries, guidelines help but are not enough. Organizational success with social media is equally about enabling and empowering employees embedded in a supportive culture with latitude for mistakes.

Finally, organizations must be ethical in their use of social media and simultaneously be cognizant of the ethical challenges of irresponsible usage. Bowen (2013, p. 126) outlines several guidelines for ethical digital engagement, which include avoiding deception, verifying data and sources, and being consistent as well as transparent, among others. These guidelines also demand consideration during the formative planning stages and ongoing reflection throughout the social media management process. Social media misuse can have far-reaching effects largely because of its permanence and visibility. Organizations, NGOs included, thus need to look in the mirror regularly and assess whether all forms of strategic communication are conducted ethically and in alignment with organizational values. Once the social media plan has been implemented, social media managers can proceed to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of their efforts in order to improve and adjust their tactics.

Evaluation and Social Media Metrics

Social media communication should be evaluated frequently, and the social media team should assess quality and quantity at all stages of the social media process. This includes preparation and strategic design, implementation, content and audience interactions, as well as the impact of the organization’s social media communication (Kim 2016). Evaluation can give confidence that strategic and tactical decisions were appropriate to meet the social media goals and objectives, and allow the social media team to document the value of its work. They can also provide opportunities for reflection and improvements as they identify where the team fell short.

Evaluating the quality of the preparation and background research, the team should consider if important information was considered, was correct, and

interpreted appropriately (Kim 2016). Clappitt's (2018) general 5C assessment model suggests that evaluation focuses on five general aspects:

1. Coordinates – appropriateness of goals and how well they are met
2. Channels – social media platform selection and management
3. Content – resonance with audiences, variety, quality, and goal orientation
4. Connections – linkages to other off- and online channels (such as the organization's website, flyers, newsletters, etc.), relevant internal resources and departments, and external communities
5. Corrections – ability to change as well as respond to gaffes and mistakes based on proper evaluation protocols

More specifically, establishing the value and impact of communication is a central concern of evaluation. This question has also been a prominent challenge for strategic communication scholars and practitioners (see Macnamara 2014). Indeed, professional associations such as the Public Relations Society of America (see PRSA n.d.) or the Institute for Public Relations (see IPR n.d.) have commissioned task forces and committees with exploring frameworks and standards for measurement and evaluation. In recent years, these efforts have also focused on the unique characteristics of social media communication and metrics.

The international Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC 2016) has put forth the Integrated Measurement Evaluation Framework. It suggests that organizations evaluate their communication on three dimensions:

1. *Communication activity* to be assessed by focusing on the quality and quantity of social media communication (outputs)
2. *Audience effects* to be analyzed by measuring outtakes (responses and reactions to the organization's content) and outcomes (change or reinforcement of audience awareness, attitude, or behavior)
3. *Impact* to be established by assessing how the social media communication has contributed to achieving higher-order organizational goals such as establishing a strong reputation or increasing donations

It is helpful that social media companies collect and provide an abundance of data about how followers interact with the organization's profile page and content. Most allow basic free and/or paid access to their analytics. Facebook pages or Twitter profiles, for instance, come with their own analytics feature, and Google Analytics allows for tracking how much traffic to the organization's websites was triggered from its social media platforms. In addition to tools provided by social media companies, organizations have a variety of options for free and paid third-party analytics services.

Social media data is reported based on common social media metrics. These are particularly useful to assess responses and reactions but also provide statistics about communication activity and some outcomes (see Table 1). Facebook Insights, for

Table 1 Selected social media metrics for different levels of evaluation

Level of evaluation	Metric	Measures
<i>Communication activity</i>	Post rate	Number of social media posts within a specific timeframe
	Response rate	Percentage of inquiries and comments the organization responded to within a specific timeframe
<i>Outtakes</i>	Impressions	Number of times a post could be seen by others
	Reach	Number of unique individuals a post could be seen by
	Likes/applause rate	Number of times content has been liked/average number of likes per post
	Shares/amplification rate	Number of times content has been shared/average number of shares per post
	Comments/conversation rate	Number of comments in response to content/average number of comments per post
	Engagements	Number of interactions with posts
	Followers/unfollows	Number of people who follow a profile or page/number of times people unfollow a page or profile
	Mentions/share of voice	Number of times the organization has been mentioned/percentage of mentions compared to competitors
	Click-through/click-through rate	Number of times a shared link has been opened, click-throughs divided by impressions
<i>Outcomes</i>	Sentiments	Percentage of positive, neutral, and negative mentions
	Conversions	Number of times social media content interaction was converted into a desired action (subscriptions, donations, signing a petition, attending an event, etc.)

instance, tracks fluctuations in following, reach of posts by time of day, likes, reactions, and shares, among many other metrics.

While social media offer unique access to data on how audiences interact with their profiles and content, evaluation methods should also include qualitative assessments and be tailored to the unique objectives and strategies pursued. The quantity of posts and responses does not reveal much about the quality of the communication activities. To get a complete picture, aspects such as quality of writing and production (for instance, videos), readability and relevance, alignment with strategic objectives, and appropriateness of responses should be assessed as well. Outtake metrics become more meaningful when, for instance, content of comments and mentions, reasons for following/unfollowing, or whether audiences have actually understood the message are explored (see IPR 2003). What's more, social media content may lead to outtakes beyond social media, for instance, if an organization's message gets picked up by traditional news media or leads to feedback and comments by phone.

Metrics are also limited when evaluating outcomes. While conversions can provide important information for specific types of lower-level goals, such as increasing subscribers, they cannot account for other changes in awareness, attitude, and behaviors. Appropriate ways for further assessment depend on the type of change as well as on the organization's budget. If the organization, for instance,

aims to increase donations or recruit volunteers, it should also collect information on what made individuals donate or sign up, in addition to tracking conversion metrics. Changes in awareness and attitude often require surveys before and after implementation to establish that a difference was made (see Macnamara 2005). This is particularly useful when organizations launch large-scale campaigns with specific timeframes (for instance, a campaign to change attitudes toward breastfeeding).

A holistic approach to evaluating multiple dimensions of social media communication quantitatively and qualitatively allows for generating important insights. This in turn helps identify where strategy and tactics need to be revisited and can be improved. Evaluation thus closes the circle of the social media process as it leads back to strategic planning and implementation.

Conclusion

In a time that some call the “era of social media” (for instance, Mutsvairo 2016), NGOs are well advised to embrace and explore the opportunities for communication that social media platforms provide. Many NGOs have shown how social media communication can significantly support efforts to increase awareness, mobilize, raise funds, build community, and engage stakeholders, among others. Navigating the social media environment so that it benefits the organization’s cause, however, is a time-consuming and challenging task. It requires resources, strategic planning, as well as expertise.

This chapter has reviewed opportunities for NGOs and outlined a strategic social media process for organizations. It includes strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation. Doing so, strategic social media management encourages organizations to implement communication creatively and oriented toward the organization’s goals and mission while embracing two-way communication, collaboration, and participation.

A strategic orientation to social media management provides focus, consistency, discipline, and orientation. While many everyday tasks of social media management may become routine, social media are vibrant, dynamic, ever-evolving, messy, collaborative, and spontaneous in nature. Besides a strategic mindset, they thus also require openness and flexibility (see Macnamara and Zerfass 2012), and one-size-fits-all recipes for communication and content will thus likely fall short. Indeed, some of the most successful social media campaigns stand out because they creatively play with the unique possibilities that social media afford and embrace user participation as well as collaboration.

Cross-References

- [Capacity Building and People’s Participation in e-Governance: Challenges and Prospects for Digital](#)

- ▶ Developing a Conceptual Framework for Digital Media and Women's Empowerment: A Communication Paradigm
- ▶ Digital Communication and Tourism for Development
- ▶ Digital Media for Sustainable Development: Future of Poor Becoming Pauper in India
- ▶ Exploring the Role of Individuals for Civic Engagement in the Digital Age. A Critical Reflection on the Sociology of Engagement under the Impact of Mediatization
- ▶ How Social Media Mash-ups Enable and Constrain Online Activism of Civil Society Organizations
- ▶ Online Social Media and Crisis Communication in China: A Review and Critique

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