

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN THE MANAGEMENT OF NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS – THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to analyze the application of social networking sites potential (SNS), mainly Facebook by non-governmental organizations regarding the role of SNS in communication and image establishment in modern organizations.

Design/methodology/approach: To achieve the objective of this paper, the analysis of available secondary data, which consists of reports and scientific studies, statistics and research conducted by international and domestic NGOs. The second stage of the study involved collecting illustrative material from official Facebook fan pages run by three NGOs with the highest number of observers according to the data from November 2024 to analyze effective instruments of their communication with stakeholders.

Findings: Communication with the organization's environment is particularly important in non-profit sector, hence the documentation of activities performed contributes to the entity's credibility and credibility and trust is the basis for the perception of third sector organizations. The functions of social media in the activities of non-governmental organizations can be divided into three areas: informational, social engagement and mobilization.

Research limitations/implications: The presented study is of conceptual character and is based mainly on available secondary data. More in-depth study based on the empirical material is necessary to demonstrate social media use in practice of non-governmental organizations in establishing their communication strategies.

Practical implications: Presented paper outlines a framework for analyzing effective communication strategies developed by non-profit sector entities. Social networking sites are important for non-governmental organizations in the perspective of fulfilling their statutory goals (information and communication activities about organization's performance and results), image establishment (tasks consisting in creating and strengthening relations with the stakeholders) and obtaining funds (information policy in the context of fundraising).

Originality/value: The paper addresses important issue in the perspective of the advancement of non-profit organizations, mainly in terms of their growing professionalization. Development and implementation of communication policy as well as selection, and use of appropriate communication channels needs to be preceded by the diagnosis of communication needs and resources available.

Keywords: information and communication technologies, non-governmental organizations, social media management, social network sites

Category of the paper: conceptual paper.

1. Introduction

In the social sciences, non-governmental organizations are most often understood as specific forms of social self-organization that have a permanent social identity, are private in nature, can use the work of volunteers in their activities, are independent, non-commercial and are created on account of voluntary decisions of their founders, organizers and members (Gliński, 2006, p. 22).

The essence of non-governmental organization is defined as an effective independent institutional mediator between business and governmental sector, which play an important role in the economic system of the state. NGO is described regarding two aspects of its role in contemporary socio-political and socio-economical system. Firstly, NGO definition relates to a socio-political institution that contributes to the solution of socio-political issues of a global and/or local nature and is capability of generating ways and means to solve them; secondly the term of NGO refers to the socio-economic body that is able to actively contribute to the economic and social life of society by creating jobs, providing various services (paid and free) that stimulate the improvement of the level and quality of society's life (Vakhovych et al., 2022).

At the organizational level, non-governmental organizations are: a specific organizational form (dependent on the legal system of a given country); organizational goals (the most important of which is the non-profit nature of the goals that distinguishes NGOs from enterprises); a community created by people who cooperate with each other, building specific structures, mobilizing resources and ideas, entering into various relationships with each other; management structures; formalization (many organizations gradually become formalized as they develop and their structures often resemble enterprises or public organizations); cost-effectiveness, because in order to achieve their goals, non-governmental organizations obtain resources from the environment, and it is crucial for them to effectively manage these resources, because they usually have a limited amount of them (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2024, pp. 22-23).

“In 2022, there were 103.4 thousand non-profit organizations operating in Poland, associating 8.3 million members. They created 153.4 thousand full-time jobs, which constituted 1.4% of the average employment in the national economy. In connection with the war operations in Ukraine, the organizations provided assistance to 17.5 million people and provided material and financial support worth PLN 1.6 billion” (Statistics Poland, 19.12.2023).

The growing role of the non-profit sector and the development of methods and forms of operation of non-governmental organizations are the cause of organizational changes, including professionalization or corporatization of third sector entities (Broomley, Meyer, 2015; Schmidt, 2020; Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2024). Professionalization, among others, is evident in the field of communication between non-governmental organizations and stakeholders with the use of instruments provided by social network sites (SNS) for this purpose. This paper aims to collect and synthesize material to address the question how third sector entities in Poland use

social media for communication purposes, what they can achieve thanks to their activity in social media, and what difficulties they encounter.

2. Methods

The course of study involved two steps – the first stage was analysis of secondary data (desk research), which consists of scientific literature, national and international statistics, available reports on Polish third sector performance in digital sphere, research conducted by non-governmental international organizations etc. Part of the collected data concerned the scientific perspective on global trend of increasing the use of social networking sites by non-governmental organizations, to global increase of social networking sites by non-governmental organizations and accompanying issues like professionalization of the non-profit sector. The general perspective was enriched by the data relating to the Polish context – showing the significant growth in applying social media tools by domestic NGOs for the purpose of information, mobilization and social engagement. The material collected from extensive literature overview was then analyzed and synthesized.

The main question posed in the paper address the use of social network sites in the management of non-governmental organizations, particularly in what way the use of social networking sites contributes to the informational purposes, image creation and community establishment. The second stage involved collecting illustrative material from official Facebook fan pages run by three NGOs with the highest number of observers according to the data from November 2024 (Facebook Trends Polska Grudzień 2024, Sotrender, 2024). The highest numbers of followers during this time were recorded by: Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity with over 1,5 million followers; DKMS – international bone marrow donor center with more than 600 thousand observers; Siepomaga.pl – crowdfunding initiative with over 570 thousand followers. Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity (WOŚP) is known for its effective use of social media to promote its activities, mobilize audience and organize annual finals for donations. DKMS fund uses social networking sites for education purposes and to encourage registration as potential bone marrow donors. Siepomaga.pl is the largest Internet platform in Poland enabling the organization and support of online charity fundraising. These organizations provide inspiring examples of effective communication with stakeholders using social media in order to advocate to their missions and goals.

3. Results

New media have redefined the concept of communication, they have become tools of the unavoidable social, cultural and political change of recent years (Celiński, 2014, p. 8). The growing role of social media in the functioning of various entities - enterprises and the public sphere - has not been without influence on the activities of entities of the so-called third sector. Non-governmental organizations utilize social media to foster supportive relationships with the public by engaging individuals and/or communities in collaborative efforts to enhance service delivery (Namisango, Kang, 2019). Many scientists have drawn attention to the issue of the use of social media by non-governmental organizations. The study of Seungah Nah and Gregory D. Saxton (2012) considers the drivers for organizational employing social media as communication instruments for NGOs, emphasizing the role of strategies, capacities and external pressure. Identification of barriers regarding the use of social networking sites by non-profit entities such as institutional policies, target audience concern or insufficient recognition of the potential of social media for strategic communication was also the subject of extensive analysis (Campbell et al., 2014). Research on content published by 100 largest non-profit organizations in the USA on Twitter (X platform) allowed Gregory D. Saxon and Kristen Lovejoy (2012) to classify the messages according to their functions which are information, community and action. Recently, Carolyn J. Cordery with co-authors (Cordery et al., 2023) analyzes the impact of digital transformation on the efficiency, management and accountability of non-governmental organizations, highlighting both opportunities and challenges related to the implementation of digital technologies in the third NGO sector, considering the diversity of stakeholders, regulations as well as resource constraints. An important aspect from the perspective of NGO activity is obtaining financial resources; the issue of use of social media for fundraising purposes is also undertaken as a research topic in contemporary scientific reflection (Elvira-Lorilla et al, 2023).

In Polish context the question of employing social networking sites in the performance of non-governmental organizations is eagerly undertaken.

Non-governmental organizations apply social media to establish effective communication on key areas for organization, for example: implementation of statutory goals, image activities and fundraising (Łosiewicz, 2018, pp. 322-323). Active communication and promotion activities contribute to the organization's competitive advantage (Domański, 2010). Professionals engaged in the non-profit sector admit that tools provided by social network sites are effective regarding event engagement, raising brand awareness, recruiting volunteers, online fundraising and advocating for statutory purposes (Developmentaid.org, 19.07.2024). Social network sites provide tools for the implementation of various activities in the communication field: information, promotion and image creation, e-mobilization, expressing attitudes, obtaining support (Dąbrowska, 2019, p. 12). According to the Nonprofit Tech for Good Report, most

NGOs worldwide use social network tools regularly; the leading platform among nonprofit professionals is Facebook – 96% of 1,732 non-profit organizations in 116 countries use Facebook pages (Nonprofit Tech for Good Report, 2023). According to data collected and shared by Klon/Jawor Association, in 2018 about 63% of Polish non-governmental organizations NGOs were present in social networking sites (Smoliński, 2021, p. 60). It should be noted however, that more current data on the subject in Poland is not available since aforementioned publication.

Most nonprofit organizations have limited financial resources, therefore social network sites provide effective tools for advocacy, building engaged community, recruiting volunteers, or acquiring donors and sponsors. Even organizations with small budgets can use the potential of social platforms to become visible in the digital world. The dominance of Facebook as a medium used by NGOs for communication purposes is unquestionable, despite the growing interest in other communication channels, such as X platform (Twitter), Instagram or TikTok. Since its launch in 2004, Facebook has evolved over the years into a very extensive medium, providing a wide range of communication possibilities. “In terms of information functions, Facebook surpasses its competitors due to its unrivaled reach, ease of use, and complete freedom in the form of information transmission” (Smoliński, 2021, p. 62).

The functions of social media in the activities of non-governmental organizations can be divided into three areas: informational, social engagement and mobilization. Information function covers a whole range of content relating to the everyday life of the organization: performed activities, conducted projects, reports issued, which may be relevant to the organization’s target group (Smoliński, 2021, p. 61). Social engagement consists of establishing dialogue and community, since the content published should encourage the public to exchange opinion, while at the same time strengthening the bonds between them (Smoliński, 2021, p. 61). The mobilization function consists in changing the attitude of participants in the communication process from awareness of the existence of a given entity to action on its behalf – which is de facto a measure of the effectiveness of the communication strategy conducted by the NGO (Smoliński, 2021, p. 61). A report conducted by the Klon/Jawor Association on the image of non-governmental organizations in Polish society indicated that media coverage is the main source of knowledge about non-profit organizations among Poles, which leads to the recognition of large foundations, while the voice of other organizations is certainly less audible (Klon, Jawor Association, 2015, p. 7). The aforementioned report showed that attitude of many non-profit organizations toward communication policy was reluctant at that time. The development of network communication has become an opportunity for third sector promotional activities that do not inconsistent with their mission (no costs related to designing and distributing promotional materials).

Communication with the organization’s environment and stakeholders is particularly important in non-profit sector, hence the documentation of activities performed contributes to the entity’s credibility and credibility and trust is the basis for the perception of third sector

organizations (Łosiewicz, 2018, p. 298). Online tools and new communication practices led to the concept of online accountability, which “refers to how an organization justifies and accounts for its actions through Internet technologies and two-way communication with stakeholders” (Cooley, 2024).

Many organizations have joined online communities for quick and effective communication with the public and its members and social network sites have become an integral part of their daily communication. Likewise non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are no exception: they also actively use SNS for reaching the target audience, share information, establish image, communicate and organize online dialogue. Increasing interest in the use of digital tools by NGOs reflects broader changes of the Internet use by the entire society.

4. Discussion

Non-governmental organizations, while conducting their tasks, become participants in the market space – therefore, one of the important elements of their performance is the preparation and implementation of an effective information policy (Łosiewicz, 2018, p. 322). Strong and well-structured presence in social media, constant cooperation with the audience facilitates the effectiveness of non-profit organizations' activities by making it easier to reach diverse groups of stakeholders. Social networking sites enable building social networks or social relationships between people; they constitute a platform for user representations, their profiles and social connections, thus providing them with mutual communication (Dąbrowska, 2019, p. 24). Extensive usage of the Internet by NGOs to communicate with the environment is one of the noticeable trends in the sector: in the period of 2002-2021 the percentage of organizations present on the Internet increased from 20% to over 90% (in 2021 more organizations had account in social networks than a website) (Klon, Jawor Association, 2022, p. 10). The development of the Internet is changing the traditional image of a stakeholder, which transfers old activities to the area of virtual performance – this evolution of stakeholders requires non-governmental organizations to modify their approach towards the potential of social networking sites (Leoński, 2016).

Publishing content that clearly communicates the mission and values of an organization is a key element of building a brand identity – this may include the history of beneficiaries, examples of specific activities performed by the NGO, and explanations of why a given mission is important to society. As far as communication activities are concerned, some platforms – including Facebook – allow to choose settings regarding the visibility of published content, which is unquestionably a good solution for different types of institutions along with non-governmental organizations, to disseminate information regarding organization's activity. Such

an approach may contribute to the increase in the number of people interested in the organization's endeavors, and thus raising the level of support (personal, financial, etc.) (Dąbrowska, 2019, p. 134).

In terms of informing, organizations can use posts or multimedia posts, however Facebook provides several other tools that allow to increase the visibility of the published content: likes, marking followers, sharing content, or inserting a hashtag. It is worth noting, that since its introduction, the "like" button has influenced the concept of image management in the digital sphere – great number of likes has a positive impact on the assessment of the image - it makes it more credible, increases its rank and prestige (Dąbrowska, 2019, p. 165). The second important indicator is the number of followers. The greater the number of followers, the more users will see the published posts. When one follows a profile or page, materials published by this person or page may appear in the follower's news feed. In Facebook, people who are friends are followed automatically. A larger number of followers means a wider reach of messages, better visibility in the digital world and potentially more occasions for the interaction.

The profiles of organizations that received the highest number of "like" reactions in November 2024 were selected for analysis (Facebook Trends Polska Grudzień 2024, Sotrender, 2024). The Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity uses Facebook profile to announce upcoming initiatives, such as charity runs – encouraging participation and support for the campaign, regularly informs about the activities of its foreign staffs, emphasizing the global reach of the initiative (for example publishing information from teams working on the final Grand Final abroad); the foundation also informs what medical equipment was purchased from public donations and where it was delivered. Inserting hashtag in creating content is important – using hashtags allows you categorize content and makes it easier for users to find posts related to specific initiatives. The Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity actively uses the stories function on its Facebook profile. Thanks to stories, the foundation can keep its followers up to date with current events, initiatives and behind-the-scenes of its activities in a dynamic and engaging way. DMKS foundation actively uses Facebook account for information: educational posts about bone marrow and stem cell donation are published. This organization also employs stories for sharing experiences of people who have received help. The DMKS initiative engages its followers encouraging them to use hashtags – for example the official hashtag #studentDKMS of the campaign "For You It's 5 Minutes, for Someone It's a Whole Life". Siepomaga.pl publishes the stories of beneficiaries – the stories of people in need of support are regularly shared, which allows donors to better understand the situation of beneficiaries; Siepomaga.pl often uses video materials to present current donations; when the fundraising campaign is completed, the foundation informs about its result and current situation of the beneficiaries, which builds trust to the initiative.

In the aspect of image creation and promotions, the following instruments can be applied: posts on current events, posts on novelties, occasional posts (holiday greetings, organizations anniversaries, meetings), encouraging audience to press like for individual posts, commenting,

online competitions, tagging photos, conversations using Messenger (Dąbrowska, 2019, p. 172). One of the biggest challenges is to skillfully manage information in the digital space of social networking sites and follow the changing behavior of the information recipient (Fabjaniak-Czerniak, 2012, p. 186). Social media is based on the two-way communication: initiating contact and then conducting a dialogue with community of participants may, in the long perspective, constitute the foundation for establishing a lasting relationship and gaining brand supporters. The two-way paradigm of communication also means that there is a possibility of receiving feedback (not always positive) for every piece of information posted or shared – this in turn can lead to spontaneous and uncontrolled creation of content about the brand or organization (Fabjaniak-Czerniak, 2012, p. 187). Entities chosen as significant examples to illustrate the performance of nonprofit organizations in social networking sites utilize variety of tools supporting image creation. The Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity promotes its charitable activities, uses instruments for engaging the community and raising awareness of the initiatives it runs. Apart from regularly shared content, the foundation utilizes evaluation function. Facebook community by means of ratings and reviews assesses foundation profile, what contributes to the increase in visibility and credibility. The Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity cooperates with local communities – local teams of WOŚP with partners like local culture centers promote events related to the organization's performance, engaging local communities in charity. It is also worth paying attention to profile photo overlays on Facebook. By adding official WOŚP overlays to their profile photos, users express their support for the initiative and at the same time increase its visibility on social media. Each such overlay is visible to the user's friends, which helps to spread awareness of WOŚP's activities and encourages more people to get involved in the campaign. The DKMS Foundation also uses overlays on Facebook as a promotional and educational tool. Such activities aim to raise awareness of bone marrow donation and build a community around the foundation's mission. By adding overlays to their profile pictures, users express their support for DKMS initiatives and help promote the idea of donation. DKMS encourages Facebook users to organize birthday charity fundraisers for the foundation. Users can set a financial goal, duration of the campaign and invite friends to support. Publication of achievements and statistics also contributes to the image creation. DKMS foundation shares successes, such as the number of newly registered donors or transplants performed. Another instrument of promotion is organizing social events and challenges: Siepomaga.pl suggests creating Facebook events and engaging challenges that mobilize the community for active participation and financial support. Siepomaga.pl also encourages fundraiser organizers to share links to their campaigns on private Facebook profiles. By involving family and friends, the reach and potential financial support are increased.

Certainly, the important issue regarding using digital tools by NGOs is the level of competence of staff members involved in the managing of the organization's account – running an organization's profile is often done intuitively, or based on experience from using private profiles, many non-governmental organizations do not invest in developing competences in this

area, which is directly related to the quality of the content created (Dąbrowska, 2019, p. 167). According to researchers, effective use of social networking sites depends on different factors: geographical (the area of the organization's operation); economic (the organization's budget including allocation for social media management); and organizational (number of members and their abilities regarding social networking sites management) (Dąbrowska, 2019, p. 209). Development and implementation of communication policy as well as selection, and use of appropriate communication channels needs to be preceded by the diagnosis of communication needs and resources available. The aforementioned organizations demonstrate high awareness and professionalization of the social media use, but this is often not the case for smaller organizations. It is worth noting that both location, size, type and scope of activity can be a significant factor differentiating the quality of communication with the environment in social networking sites.

5. Conclusion

Technological growth is an important aspect of the rarely identified with the development of the organizational capabilities of non-governmental organizations. However, the impact of technological solutions and development on the non-profit sector was not perceived as inevitable, because initially non-governmental organizations have been recognized as technologically handicapped, which usually did not interfere with their activities and implementation of statutory goals (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2013, p. 90). In fact, access to new technologies means the possibility of improving or expanding the scope of services provided, increasing access to information or facilitating contact with stakeholders. The most popular social network sites used by non-profit organizations is Facebook – NGO's apply Facebook for digital marketing, and fundraising campaigns.

Expanding the range of means of accessing the audience has a practical aspect in the context of the functioning of the NGO sector: most non-governmental organizations are focused on achieving their goals, but often suffer from a lack of time, and new technologies can help solve many problems; thus, the third sector organizations facilitate communication, while supporting further development. An important aspect regarding the social media use in non-governmental sector emphasizes the advancement of non-profit organizations, mainly in terms of their growing professionalization.

The analysis of literature and the collected examples of the use of social networking sites by Polish non-governmental organizations shows how important a strategic approach to digital communication is. Efficient use of digital information and communication tools requires a professional approach – in this sphere the difference is most visible between smaller entities suffering from staff shortages (e.g. local organizations from rural areas) and organizations with

larger budgets that manage to undertake coordinated information and communication activities. Indicators in this area are the number, type and frequency of published content, use of hashtags, engaging followers in discussions, etc. Content published on the profiles of smaller organizations is often incidental, and messages do not conform into a coherent communication strategy. In-depth analysis considering how smaller non-governmental organizations cope in the digital world and how they use the potential of digital communication is worth undertaking.

Although the presented article refers only to the activity of three well-known entities of the third sector, based on the analysis undertaken, it is possible to formulate research hypotheses that are a basis for in-depth qualitative and quantitative research considering the differences between organizations, such as: level of operation, type of organization, location, and scope of activity.

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