

Kasper Nurmi

Not a numbers game

– How non-profit organisations measure the impact of social media

Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences

Bachelor of Business Administration

European Management

Thesis

05.05.2017

Author(s) Title	Kasper Nurmi Not a numbers game – how non-profit organisations measure the impact of social media
Number of Pages Date	45 + 2 appendices 05.05.2017
Degree	Bachelor of Business Administration
Degree Programme	European Management
Specialisation option	Finance & Banking
Instructor(s)	Louise Stansfield, Senior Lecturer
<p>The thesis explores social media use of Finnish non-profit organisations using the examples of the Finnish Red Cross and the World Wildlife Foundation Finland. Although the field is widely discussed, no previous studies have looked at the measuring of social media communication in the field of Finnish non-profits. In order to assess the impact of their online communication, specifically on social media platforms, organisations have begun to implement various tools for data accumulation and analysis. Through four semi-structured interviews, the study seeks to establish the current state of strategic social media communication and examine how and to what extent organisations have adopted social media metrics.</p> <p>The thesis concludes that while Finnish non-profits are in the process of developing more sophisticated data analytics and methods to measure social media communication, they struggle to measure impact beyond quantitative metrics. Meanwhile, the platforms themselves are ever-changing and offer a wider set of tools accompanied by third-party analytics that are becoming cheaper to implement. The need for recommendations and guidelines became evident in the interviews, however a relevant framework for impact analysis has not yet been established. Highlighting the specific case of two organisations, this thesis should serve as a starting point for future research into the topic, laying the groundwork for replicating and comparing the implementation of measuring impact of social media.</p>	
Keywords	NPO, Social media, metrics, impact, analytics

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Glossary

NPO

Non-profit organisations (NPO) are defined as legal entities that do not generate income that is to be distributed to their owners or employees. In the Finnish context, non-profits are defined as a group of people or an organisation that's purpose is to execute a common goal, value or interest (Siisiäinen 1996: 13).

Communication

Based on the assumption that communication always has an impact, Wilbur Schramm's communication model is for the most part applicable. In addition to his formulation, social media amplifies the importance of feedback and interactivity. In addition to the Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver model, the (un)intended impact that is evident in the (re)action of the receiver must be included.

Social media

For the purpose of the thesis, the definition by Boyd & Ellison (2008) is followed: "We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals [and organisations] 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" Additionally, the creating and interacting with content is important to the definition (Boyd & Ellison 2008).

Social Media Metrics

The basis for assessing social media use and developing it. Qualitative and quantitative data that is produced by using social media/engagement platforms and can be measured, analysed and represented by organisations to use in assessing results and impact.

Impact

In the thesis, impact is assumed as the purpose of all communication. In the context of non-profit organisations, it is defined by Garcia et al. (2013), as "positive social change coherent with mission and values [of the organisation] that is promoted and sustained over the long-term". Depending on the cause of the organisation, this might vary from collecting donations to influencing decision making, connecting people in need with people willing to help or advocating for a certain perspective as a representative of a group.

Facebook

A platform for sharing text, pictures, videos and links to other content on the internet with friends and acquaintances. Users can create content, react to content by 'liking', commenting or sharing it with their network. Organisations can also create profiles with the same functions and communicate with target audiences. It is currently the biggest social media platform with 1.8 billion active monthly users (Statista 2017).

Twitter

A micro-blogging platform for individuals and organisations to share content with 'followers' (other users that have chosen to see their content) in a maximum of 140 characters. Twitter enables users to share links, pictures and text with other users and engage with the content by responding, liking and 'retweeting', e.g. sharing with one's own network.

1 Introduction

As communication is increasingly moving to the digital space with widespread adoption of smartphones and internet-capable devices, social media are at the centre of the revolution. The platforms are not only for individuals to communicate with each other, organisations are expected to make use of the technology as well. As with all new technology, early adopters paved the way for others while exploring new ways of communicating with audiences, making use of pictures, video and other digital content. However, as the efforts and resources devoted to social media communication have increased, organisations are beginning to look for measurable results and justification for their investments. Specifically, non-profit organisations have struggled with translating social media efforts into real life action and impact in society.

The field of social media research is a relatively new but recognised field of study as the oldest platforms have existed for decades, matured and found their place in peoples' everyday lives. No longer is the digital space considered an addition or supplement to the real world, they are inseparable and actions online can lead to change in real life and vice versa. However, the question of how to leverage these new media is yet to be answered.

On the other hand, social media communications (for the definition, see glossary) is an emerging sub-field of communications research and lacks the common consensus and theories that result from decades of research. In addition, the nature of the platforms and services makes it difficult for results and conclusions to be applicable for a long period. The context is radically different and it requires a completely new approach to communications research. One cannot rely on traditional theory and existing frameworks to explain the impact social media has on today's society.

Broadcasting and informing the public through traditional channels, as has been done in the past, is nowhere near enough by today's standards to maintain authority and presence in the public discussion. Expectations for communication are becoming more complex and changing constantly. Non-profits cannot rely on old methods and ways of operating to remain relevant.

Currently, as the communication platforms are constantly evolving and offering organisations a wider set of tools to analyse and make use of the vast amounts of data that are being produced every minute of the day, practitioners struggle to make use of it and focus on the relevant information. New norms and ways of strategically approaching social media are clearly needed to make effective use of these channels. Phenomena such as many-to-many communication, interacting in real time and “viral communication” are all new to both researchers and social media professionals.

The opportunities that social media have to offer are the topic of much discussion. With limited resources, non-profit organisations have been eager to make wide use of the available channels, for obvious reasons: the ease of communicating directly with the target audience, lowered reliance on traditional media attention and gatekeepers to participate and be heard in public discussions, the possibilities of data analytics and cost-effectiveness have encouraged organisations to migrate into the online space.

Current research in the field is taking cues from marketing and communications research and focusing for the most part on social media content, trying to answer questions such as “what type of content is being published and to what end?”, “how well do NPOs communicate on social media?”, “how do non-profits compare to commercial organisations in their use of social media?”, etc. While an important and essential step in understanding social media use, these questions only provide a starting point for assessing the usefulness of the online platforms. The next step to understanding and justifying investments includes assessing what the goal of the produced content is, does it support organisational strategy and to what extent, if at all. These questions have received far less attention.

The Finnish research into non-profits’ social media use is far less established. While attempts at content analysis have been made, as will be discussed below, there is a sizable gap in research on how social media can help an organisation achieve its operational goals and execute its strategy. With increased competition for donations, new members and the public’s attention, non-profits have to change their approach to social media and operations in general in order to have a continued impact in society in the future.

With the wide adoption of digital communication tools, the demand for such research is increasing. This thesis seeks to provide a starting point for these efforts and illuminate the current state of measuring social media communication and how impact is assessed. While nowhere comprehensive and generally applicable, the thesis aims to show how well non-profits are prepared to make use of social media and what areas need of improvement.

2 Methodology

This section will define the research question, provide justification for the originality and relevance of the topic in question, and discuss relevant research methods as well as explain the basis for the choice of interviewees.

2.1 Research question

The need to analyse social media metrics and how non-profits measure impact arises from the increasing importance of digital platforms as communication channels. As all kinds of organisations rush to adopt these channels, they struggle with finding ways of maximising the benefit of social media as a strategic approach is often neglected. This is even more evident in non-profit organisations compared to their commercial counterparts, that experience more pressure to prove short-term results and success. However, both fields have established the need for such an approach (see chapter 3). The study seeks to establish the current state of data-driven social media communication and its integration in organisational strategy. The research question is therefore two-fold:

1. What kind of metrics are used by non-profit organisations to analyse their contributions on social media?
2. How well do the used metrics enable assessing the impact of social media in achieving strategic goals?

2.2 Qualitative research

In order to gain insights into what particular metrics and measurement methods are used, it is necessary to develop an understanding of the organisation's strategy and goals. This requires more in-depth analysis than a survey or collection of quantitative data would allow for. Moreover, quantitative research is justified if the purpose of the analysis is to establish patterns and/or comparable statistics. In contrast, qualitative research seeks to explore and identify motivations and reasons for behaviour and actions (Kothari 2004: 3).

Specifically, the research question explores the reasons and motivation from the point of view of the organisation for the chosen metrics and their ability to measure impact of social media communication. This demands in-depth information gathering which could not be achieved with quantitative methods.

The context of the study is particularly important when focusing on underlying motivations in communication research. Therefore, the approach is further justified: to discover the underlying reasons for the chosen metrics in the context of the individual organisation and how the practitioners perceive their success in measuring impact. Due to limited time, the depth of the research only allowed for four interviews, which amplifies the importance of the context in which they operate. As the purpose was to discover organisation-specific use of metrics, a limited number of participants suited the approach. However, a broader sample size would have allowed for more generalisable results and implications. While some results are overlapping, the majority represent the subjective viewpoints of the interviewees. While the results cannot be directly applied to all Finnish NPOs, they do provide a starting point for a discussion about how social media and related challenges are being addressed in non-profit organisations.

2.3 Semi-structured interviews

A semi-structured interview was chosen to maintain a coherent and transferable nature for the answers while allowing the interviewees to highlight problems and issues they face. As Sreejesh et al. note, the method allows for flexibility to further develop on the interviewees' answers while maintaining the focus on the topic of the study (2014: 48). The interviews consisted of a set of questions that provided a guideline for which topics to cover and additional questions were asked based on the interviewees' answers. The purpose of this method was to examine social media communication metrics, the underlying justification for their adoption and how these metrics are used in order to assess organisational impact.

Interviewees were chosen based on their position in the organisation and interviews ranged in length, from half an hour to 90 minutes (further details can be found in appendix 1) depending on the availability of the interviewee.

Due to the lack of a general framework on which to base the research question on, the method additionally allowed for exploration of new ideas and perspectives in the process. The structure and flexibility maintained the comparability across interviews while showcasing the specific challenges of each organisation and practitioner. Questions asked included general inquiries about the current state of metrics the organisation uses, such as "What metrics are used by the organisation?", "How much attention is given to the use of metrics and how is this visible in the planning phase of social media communication, i.e. how does it affect the communication plan for social media?".

The second part of the interview focused on the relationship of social media communication and organisational strategy. The questions included "How are the data/results used in decision making or strategic planning?" and "In what way should the use of social media and its metrics be developed in order to better support organisational goals?". The full list of questions is found in appendix 2.

A case-study of a single organisation, while sufficiently explaining the context and interrelatedness of social media use and strategic goals would be highly subjective. Therefore, the result of the case study would not support the research question at hand and only offer a perspective on how a specific organisation is measuring, analysing and developing their social media use. In this regard, it was more beneficial to interview various practitioners and search for overlaps, reoccurring arguments and justifications in order to somewhat be able to compare and highlight similarities for the wider field of NPO social media use and its impact in the Finnish context.

2.4 Importance and originality

The originality of the research is based on the fact that so far Finnish studies of non-profit organisations' social media use have been limited to either general usage or content analysis of specific channels (Facebook or Twitter). Therefore, not much time or consideration has been devoted to analysing the impact that communication on these channels have or how they assist in achieving operational and strategic goals (see literature review for further discussion).

The importance of the research is evident in that more and more communication is being conducted online and digital communication is growingly centred around social media. It is perceived to be a cost-effective, efficient and direct way of reaching the organisation's target audience and social media allows communicators to spread their message to wider audiences than in traditional media.

Moreover, as non-profits are beginning to compete for limited resources and attention of the public, it is beneficial to make efficient use of the resources at their disposal. There is a clear need for an applicable framework and guidelines on how to measure the impact of social media that are aligned with the organisations strategy and goals. Such a framework is currently lacking, as is evident based on the following literature review and the findings of this thesis.

2.5 Choice of interviewees

The preliminary choice of interviewees was made based on the size and function of the organisation. While a variety of non-profit organisations exist and operate in Finland, the majority of them are not using social media to the extent that would imply a strategic approach. Furthermore, in order to conduct interviews with practitioners, the organisation had to have an appointed person in charge of overseeing/producing/monitoring social media use. Due to resource constraints and the nature of the non-profit, many Finnish organisations lack a social media practitioner. This requirement narrowed the field of possible interviewees significantly, as many NPOs have yet to establish the above mentioned position.

It was important that the organisation had sufficient resources to actively and strategically engage on social media using more than one platform. Therefore, organisations with inactive, little or no presence on social media were disregarded as potential interviewees. To broaden the perspective, a consulting company that specialises in social media communication for NPOs was contacted. The choice was made to allow for a broader view and to review social media use in general in the field of Finnish NPOs.

The narrowed down list included seven different organisations, of which all were contacted. The original list included: World Wildlife Foundation Finland, Finnish Red Cross, Miltton, Greenpeace Finland, Aalto University, University of Helsinki and Viestintä-Piritta. Of the seven, three agreed to an interview. This led to interviewing a Digital Producer at the World Wildlife Foundation Finland, a Digital Producer at the Finnish Red Cross and two Communications Consultants at Viestintä-Piritta (see appendix 1 for profiles on interviewees).

2.6 Translations

Due to the specific context of the literature used for the research, applicable Finnish literature and references as well as interviews have been freely translated by the author. As for the interviews, the decision to conduct them in Finnish was made in order to facilitate the communication between the interviewer and interviewee and take into account the cultural context in which the non-profit organisations operate. Relevant research material for the literature review of Finnish non-profit organisations is found in the references and material of the conducted interviews is held by the author.

3 Literature Review

In this section, a general overview of relevant research in the field of social media research and non-profit organisations is examined. First, literature of social media use in the organisational context will be discussed as well as the findings of previous research. In the second part, the review discusses research that covers how NPOs are using social media, specifically the use of metrics and how well data is being analysed. Next, literature on the connection of measuring social media and operations is explored. Section 3.3 focuses on the cultural context, namely social media use by Finnish non-profit organisations in order to define the state of the research and establish the originality of the research question.

3.1 Current state of social media literature

A general consensus has been established in both academia and professional organisational research about the importance of adopting social media channels as part of the organisations communication strategy (Greenberg & MacAulay 2009; Kietzmann et al. 2011; Waters et al. 2009). The majority of research papers are emphasising the use of correct metrics in order to increase the effectiveness of digital marketing and communications online (Agostino & Sidorova 2016; Lewis & Rao 2015; Sidorova et al. 2016). However, less attention has been given to the critical assessment of these metrics and how they can be used effectively to guide overall marketing/communication strategy and budget.

While it is clear that new media and engagement platforms enable greater measurement and targeting of communication efforts (Greenberg & MacAulay 2009; Liu 2012; Lovejoy & Saxton 2012), the link between organisational communication online and the impact of said organisations is yet to be proven (Obar 2014; Liu 2012). While social media platforms enable measuring quantitative data, goal setting and segmentation in abundance, analysis of this data in relation to strategic goals has received less attention.

Making use of new communication channels have widely been studied in the context of commercial organisations. Agostino and Sidorova (2016) argue that benefits such as highly precise targeting, the ability to measure various metrics and built in functionality that enables analysis of gathered data offer an opportunity for companies to communicate more effectively and use their marketing budget more efficiently. The direct effects of communication on social media, however, are difficult to measure as argued by Greenberg and MacAulay (2009).

Hoffman and Fodor (2010) go on to suggest that impact and effectiveness are not directly measurable. They recommend using proxy metrics, such as time spent on the company website, the amount and sentiment of comments on updates/tweets/videos posted and argue that such an approach is more telling of the long-term commitment of the audience and will translate into more financial returns (Hoffman & Fodor 2010).

Compared to for-profit organisations that have a clearly stated and mandated goal guiding all their actions (to turn a profit and benefit the owners financially), non-profits are driven by their social cause and mission. Social media strategy and optimisation and therefore impact are dependent on the cause and are individual to each organisation (Deschamps & McNutt 2014). This makes it more difficult to compare the use of social media and the kind of impact communication on these channels have.

3.2 Non-profit organisations using social media

In today's media landscape, NPOs are competing for attention of the individual citizen rather than that of the media with the use of digital communication channels. Social media allow for this kind of direct communication with existing stakeholders while reaching new audiences at the same time (Thrall et al. 2014). Furthermore, research has established the need and the benefits for organisations to utilise these channels to enhance their communication with their target group (Curtis et al. 2010). According to Greenberg and MacAulay (2009), NPOs are relationship driven organisations by nature and social media facilitate fostering these relationships cost effectively. Despite this fact, many of the studied organisations were slow to adopt the technology and make use of its dialogic opportunities (Galvez-Rodriguez et al. 2016; Lovejoy et al. 2012; Nordström 2012).

Recent studies of social media use by NPOs have largely been limited to analysing Twitter and Facebook (Galvez-Rodriguez et al. 2016; Greenberg & MacAulay 2009; Lovejoy et al. 2012; Waters and Lo 2012). While these efforts explore the issue of social media content, the limited and specific nature of Twitter and Facebook only enable a partial analysis of the benefits and impact that organisations can achieve.

3.2.1 Goal setting and effective use

While goal setting in the commercial context is more defined, depending on business goals, and measuring is mostly done in monetary values, assessing the effectiveness and impact achieved by non-profit organisations is more challenging. Garcia et al. (2013) propose a framework that borrows from effectiveness analysis of for-profit businesses using the marketing research perspective (Figure 1). The framework presents a way for non-profit organisations to analyse the context in which they communicate but fails to address the concrete ways said communication can and should be measured.

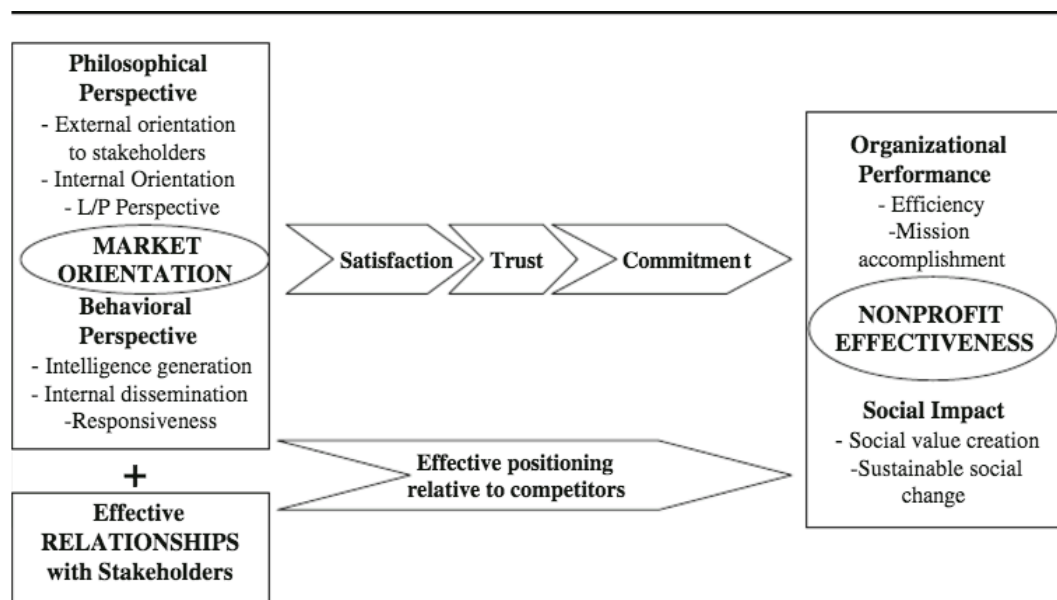


Figure 1. Proposed framework for NPO communication analysis. (Garcia et al. 2013)

While much of the research argues for effective use of social media to enhance communication, it is still unclear as to what actually constitutes effective use.

As organisational strategies and missions vary a great deal, it is nearly impossible to establish a generally applicable framework or model that would consider all of the goals and targets set by NPOs. In addition, the studies that have examined social media use conducted their analysis from an independent observer's point of view (Galvez-Rodriguez et al. 2016; Lovejoy & Saxton 2012; Waters and Lo 2012). Therefore, the perceived benefits from an organisational viewpoint have been neglected.

At the core, the organisational goals of attracting customers, in the case of non-profits donors and/or members, and money is involved in order to finance the organisation's activities, are the same as those of for-profits. Therefore, NPOs might draw upon best practices established in the corporate world and with modification and customisation, succeed in measuring the influence/impact of their communication in social media channels (Garcia et al. 2013).

3.2.2 Analysing impact

To assess the perceived benefits and impact of using social media to communicate, it is important to define the strategic goals that the organisation tries to achieve and the accompanying metrics against which set goals can be evaluated. Lovejoy and Saxton propose a model in their study of American non-profit organisations and attempt to categorise Twitter use in a triangular framework (2012). The categories identified are Information, Community and Action and are based on an analysis of individual tweets by the participating organisations (Lovejoy & Saxton 2012). While such an analysis is the first step in understanding NPOs use of social media, the focus is on the content of the messages and not their impact.

In his research of Canadian advocacy groups, Obar (2014) found that participants perceived social media to enable making better use of limited resources, having a wider reach than traditional media and interacting with their target group. Furthermore, the ability to communicate with audiences in real time and engaging in discussions about current events that are of interest to the community were named. However, the surveyed groups felt a lack of understanding in how social media advance their strategic goals and can benefit them strategically (Obar 2014).

For the purpose of analysing impact, it is essential to recognise that communication affecting the organisation is not only a two-way or dialogic (from organisation to member/receiver or vice versa) but also happening increasingly peer-to-peer where neither the contributor nor the audience is known to the organisation (Nordström 2012). Communication on the internet is about surrendering control and participating in the discussion instead of dictating agendas/messages/meaning and organisations must be a part of the discussion and present themselves as honest, transparent and accountable, as stated by Nordström (2012). Therefore, measuring becomes exponentially difficult and resource-demanding as online conversations and messages are created constantly in abundance.

Moreover, focusing on the wrong metrics can distort the gathered data and the following analysis of said metrics, Baym notes (2013). Social media platforms use algorithms to promote certain type of content to users depending on preference, and therefore users are more prone to see content that they already affiliate with. This may lead to misinformed decisions and misallocation of funds by organisations trying to reach particular audiences. Focusing on the right data is as important as measuring it at all (Baym 2013).

In their study of commercial social media use, Hoffman and Fodor (2010) suggest an extensive framework of metrics for various channels, measuring both quantitative as well as qualitative data. According to them, traditional metrics used in marketing and public relations neglect the ability to analyse and use qualitative data in parallel to quantifiable data to achieve qualitative objectives (Hoffman & Fodor 2010). In their view, these capabilities have been underutilised by organisations which negatively affects the efficient and effective allocation of marketing spending.

Studying Italian businesses in various sectors, Sidorova et al. (2016) come to a similar conclusion. While most companies have some metrics in place, the majority of them are not monitored sufficiently and are only used in order to assess individual campaigns, lacking a coherent strategy and assessment. Measuring is predominantly focused on quantitative metrics provided by the individual platform (for example Facebook Insights and TweetStats), which lack the depth needed for a thorough analysis to support decision making (Sidorova et al. 2016).

The need to quantify contributions has been recognised in academia more widely: Agostino & Sidorova (2016) emphasise the importance of linking social media communication to financial goals as well as the value created for the users when engaging with the organisation. They go on to note that “an overarching view about social media measurement is missing” and propose a framework based in performance measurement systems, which includes metrics as well as methods of analysis. However, the researchers conclude that there is no consensus as to which metrics should be included or how to measure qualitative data, such as sentiment of comments and content, objectively (Agostino & Sidorova 2016).

There seems to be a lack of clear guidelines as to which metrics should be given weight when assessing the impact of a particular contribution. While easily quantifiable data and metrics, such as reach, engagement, even return on investment seem to be preferred by the majority of commercial and non-commercial organisations alike, the implications and usability of this data to assess an organisation's impact are not confirmed (Liu 2012). Thus far, the value of a ‘like’, ‘retweet’ or ‘share’ for an organisation seems highly subjective. It is debatable whether these are the right metrics to focus on in order to assess the effectiveness and impact of social media communications.

Critique and concern for real life action has also been raised, as witnessed by the emergence of so called “clicktivism” or “slacktivism”. The terms refer to audiences politically and societally engaging in activism online, such as signing petitions, sharing information on issues advocated for by NPOs, while neglecting taking action in the physical world. Some researchers conclude that the opportunity to participate through such channels lowers the barriers and costs for individuals, resulting in a more engaged public (Collin 2008; Karpf 2010), while others argue that such engagement is restricted to the online space and does not support real change in society (Macnamara 2012). This can lead to inflated and over-optimistic conclusions about the importance of an issue for the public and misguide analysis as to how well resources are spent to achieve impact and change in society. Most academics argue that this form of civic engagement is yet to be recognised as a legitimate form of action due to its recency and conclusions about its value cannot yet be made (Nam 2012; McCafferty 2011).

3.3 Finnish Context

The extent to which research has been conducted with regards to non-profit organisations operating in the Finnish context is still narrow. While attempts have been made to establish research into the use of social media (Huttunen 2016; Pulliainen 2016; Seppälä 2014), there is no indication of studies focusing on the use of metrics and the impact of communication in interactive digital channels for non-profit organisations.

Much of the body of knowledge is based in the Anglo-American environment, with a focus on Canada and the United States (Deschamps & McNutt 2014; Garcia et al. 2013; Lovejoy & Saxton 2012; Obar 2014). However, despite the fact that some conclusions can be drawn from the existing research, due to the nature in which the societies are organised, it is reasonable to assume that content and strategic goals of communication differ. Furthermore, as the cultural setting plays an important part in communications, and the regions' cultures do differ, results are not directly transferable to Finnish NPOs.

In accordance with the research conducted in the Anglo-American context, the need for Finnish non-profits to measure and analyse the use of social media has been established. Seppälä notes that many Finnish organisations do partake in discussions on the platforms, however they lack a clear direction and the means to monitor their activities and results (2014). Furthermore, the broader context of communications is often neglected: followers and the public are actively engaging in discussions about the cause and issues the NPO is advocating for and metrics should therefore not be limited to the organisation's own contributions (Seppälä 2014). According to Seppälä (2014), a superficial analysis of quantitative metrics does not provide useful conclusions as to how social media can be used to impact the society and to further strategic goals.

Huttunen (2016) studied the use of Facebook by a Finnish NPO and specifically, compared the content of posts on the public Facebook page and an associated closed group for users interested in the organisation's work.

The analysis of communication was based on a classification of messages first established by Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) which was adapted and extended to fit the purpose of the research and explore the interactivity of communication in depth. The study concludes that while the audiences of both the public page and closed group might be similar and overlapping, the functions are distinct: closed groups are used for sharing of information, whereas the public page is calling the audience to take action. Furthermore, users in the closed group were engaging in discussions more often than on the public page, where communication was mainly one-way, despite the size discrepancy of the two audiences (Huttunen 2016).

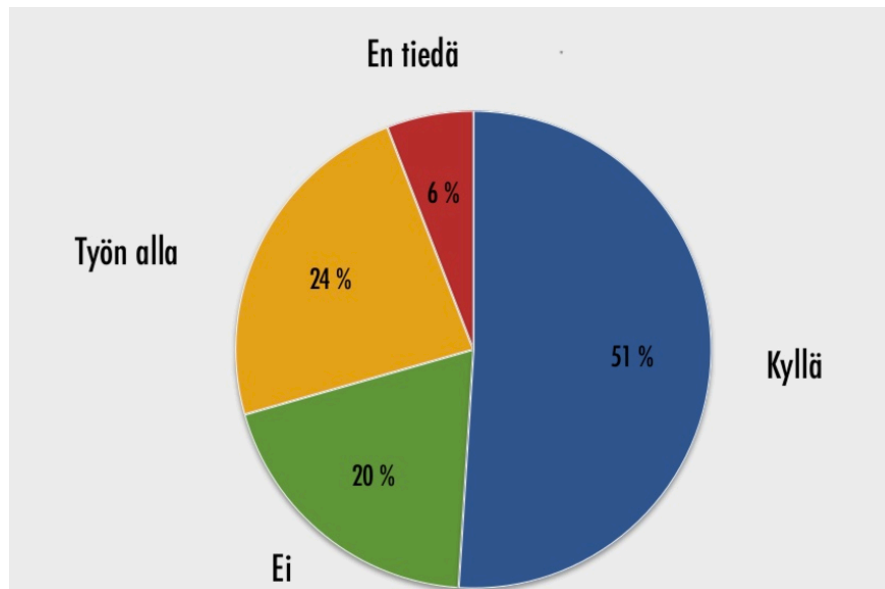
Pulliainen (2016) conducted a similar study of The Finnish Association for Nature Conservation (FANC) and the organisation's use of social media to communicate with stakeholders, specifically on Facebook. The study analysed and compared the organisation's use of Facebook in 2010 and 2015 and found that the contributions had moved towards a more diverse strategy: The function of communication evolved from a mainly informational and promotional one (classified as one-way communication) to a more balanced stream of interactive messages consisting of calls to action and community oriented messages in order to strengthen ties with the stakeholders (Pulliainen 2016). Messages that drew attention to relevant issues, such as environmental protection, preserving the Finnish nature and politics related to these topics, engaged the audience (Pulliainen, 2016). Overall, the audience was more engaged and exchanged messages between themselves on the public page of the organisation.

Honkala and Nissinen conducted a research on the future outlooks from the perspective of practitioners and experts and how it will affect communication in general (2012). According to their interviews, social media were seen as a potentially effective way of organising people and communicating with stakeholders. However, many organisations had not established a clear purpose and strategy for engaging and were still lacking in the execution to make use of the new channels (Honkala & Nissinen 2012). Moreover, the study also attempted to establish scenarios for the future development of social media from perspective of NPOs and how it will change overall civic engagement and activism in society.

In his research, Paso (2017) explores the reasons for public relations and external communication of Finnish NPOs. In the study, the primary reason named for external communication was impact, which constituted of specific actions that the organisation wanted the audience or decision makers to take (Paso 2017: 20). According to the results of the study, social media have changed the way organisations communicate to some degree: effective and impactful communication is directed at either decision makers, such as politicians, or the general public faster than through traditional media. It has enabled interaction with all constituents, however, no clear links could be established between social media communication and impact (Paso 2017).

A yearly survey conducted by Seppälä (2015) concludes that while social media use has been established as an important part of communication and non-profits' activities in general, the lack of precise metrics and analysis of data limit the effective use of various channels. While practitioners are aware of the need for using metrics, adoption is limited by the resources available to them (Seppälä 2015).

The following year, the same survey showed that only half of the respondents had implemented a social media strategy (Figure 2) and two-thirds of organisations measured the success of communication (Figure 3) (Seppälä & Sorsa 2015). Furthermore, according to the survey, only quantitative metrics, such as engagement rates, the number of followers for the account or reach of individual content, were used. Most strikingly, "no metrics" was the fourth most often cited answer when asked about the most used metrics (Seppälä & Sorsa 2015).

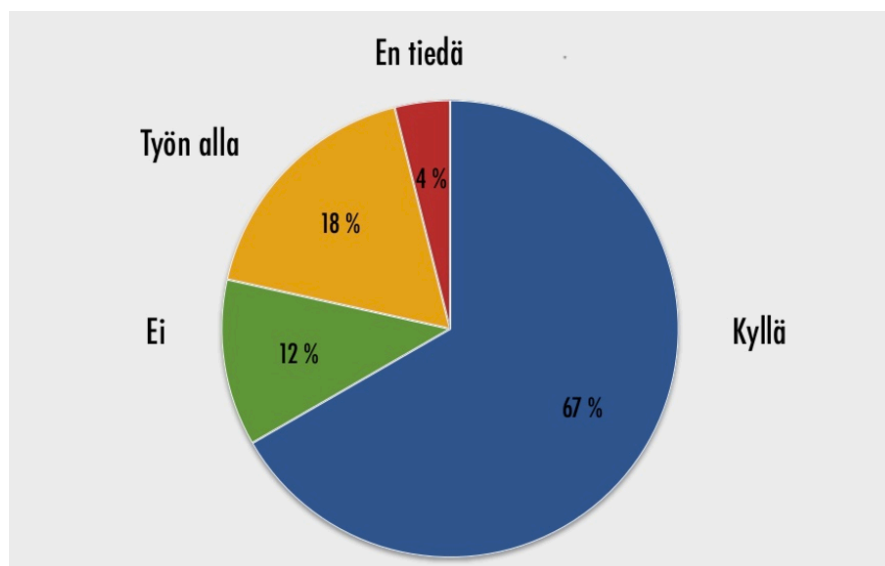


Legend Figure 2

Have you implemented a social strategy?

- Blue: Yes, 51%
- Green: No, 20%
- Yellow: In the works, 24%
- Red: Don't know, 6%

Figure 2. Implementation of social media strategy by non-profit organisations. (Seppälä & Sorsa 2015)



Legend Figure 3

Do you measure success on social media?

- Blue: Yes, 67%
- Green: No, 12%
- Yellow: In the works, 18%
- Red: Don't know, 4%

Figure 3. Measuring the success of social media communications. (Seppälä & Sorsa 2015)

However, the trend among surveyed professionals implies that metrics and methods of analysis are being developed and their importance will increase in correlation with the importance of social media as a communication channel (Seppälä & Sorsa 2015). This is represented by the yellow parts in the charts above, with 24% for social media strategy and 18% for measuring success, respectively.

None of the investigated research provides conclusive findings as to how social media metrics can be used to assess impact and facilitate strategic decision making at the organisational level. This can be partly explained by the emerging body of research in Finland, as academics have only recently started taking social media use in the Finnish context seriously. Second, the lack of pre-existing frameworks in the field can also be a hindrance to adequately assessing impact. As platforms and channels evolve constantly and the amounts of generated data exponentially grow, having such a framework would benefit NPOs with limited resources and to enact change faster in society.

4 Findings

The interviews discussed below were conducted with two practitioners of social media, Mari Paavoseppä of the World Wildlife Foundation Finland and Seppo Kujanpää of the Finnish Red Cross, respectively, and two social media and communications consultants, Piritta Seppälä and Pauliina Mäkelä of Viestintä Piritta, both with extensive experience in the field. The results reflect the two perspectives, one being the day-to-day social media use and its challenges from the perspective of the non-profit organisations and the other from the broader perspective of how social media are being adopted, used and developed in the field of non-profits.

4.1 Purpose of social media

Strategy and the mission in general dictate communication and it is build top-down from an organisational level to the individual departments and units. Depending on the nature of the goals, communication can focus on a variety of messages and a coherent image or strategy might be hard to achieve while ensuring coverage of all the different goals the organisation has.

We are a vast and spread-out organisation with an incredibly wide range of different activities and the different operations have different goals. And as all [communication] goals should always be part of the organisational goals... the social media goals vary a lot. That is in my opinion the reason why we don't have a clear strategy and goal setting... (Kujanpää 2017)

For example, all communication and operations at WWF are planned in the context of their operational goals of preserving the biodiversity of the planet and reducing greenhouse gas emissions to a sustainable level. These goals guide the communication strategy and social media use. In recent years, however, the way communication is prioritised and conducted has changed: previously, all goals and operations were thought of as equally important from a communications perspective, whereas since the introduction of strategic communication analysis and metrics, clear priorities have emerged (Paavoseppä, 2017).

Compared to this, the Finnish Red Cross, with an extensive network of local organisations spread out nationally and internationally, tries to co-ordinate the content while maintaining the individual goals of each local unit in mind. This can make it hard to find a coherent and goal driven voice online while informing the public about the various issues the organisations advocates for and the operations they conduct:

Setting goals, and finding a tone of voice for example is difficult, as we talk about so many different things, in addition to reacting to societal questions. Due to this, the strategy side has been neglected, in my view and strategy is [on an abstract level]...There are strategies for sure, and the positions are there but they haven't been written down because of the change and variety of activity. (Kujanpää 2017)

For WWF, the purpose of online communication is two-fold: to receive donations, as the organisation is relying on financial support from individuals to be able to achieve goals described above, and call people to take action. While some people are able to support the organisation financially, "we also need hundreds of thousands people changing the way they behave, and that is effectively our goal for communications". (Paavoseppä 2017)

4.2 Metrics

As is evident by the interviews, NPOs are still in the process of trying to find a suitable and sufficient set of metrics to make better use of their social media channels. Much of the communication and content is measured and analysed based on quantitative metrics, such as reach, engagement, click through rates and others readily available on most platforms. Depending on the channel, more specific analytics might be used. One of the issues raised in the interviews was the need for resources allocated to data analysis in order to make better use of the various channels. This is supported by the fact that organisations rely heavily on elementary statistics and metrics provided by the platform they are communicating on. Facebook Insights and Twitter Analytics were mentioned as important tools providing basic figures on how well organisations are communicating on the platform.

Mäkelä (2017) suggests that in order to have the ability to measure social media results and make conclusions about the direction it should be developed towards, practitioners have to establish concrete and measurable goals and analyse successes against set goals. Mäkelä goes on to state that “you can’t achieve your goals unless you write down the starting point and then later measure if anything has changed” (2017).

Integration of social media into the organisation’s activities to achieve general goals is seen as one of the weak points that all interviewees regard as a priority to be addressed. Allowing for more time and dedicating resources to develop tools and methods to assess online communications will be an integral part in furthering the non-profits’ goals in the future. All interviewees agreed that the importance of social media is only likely to increase in the future. For this reason, separating it from operations and organisational goals is not possible anymore, and digital integration across the organisation will likely affect success and subsequently the impact in society. Non-profits have recognised the need of using social media to support their operations, however the link between social media strategy and general goals is lacking.

The concretisation of goals is currently where we are at...Through the analysis of successful use of current channels, for example through the analysis of content, we can find concrete goals [for individual channels]...We can’t say that NPO’s are very active in measuring results but that is the state of mind that we are heading towards. Now we have found goals...based on what we are aiming for, we can start measuring if we are successful. (Seppälä 2017)

When [organisations] get the initial understanding and get over the fears, risks and threats, then they start to take proper actions and understand that social media must be a part of all other communications strategy and the organisations overall strategy. It is not separate from it. (Mäkelä 2017)

For the most part, metrics and their use are determined by the nature of the campaign that is currently being promoted by the non-profit. Many of them are thematic and based on either current events or the time of the year (around public holidays or other important dates). Due to this, comparing the different campaigns, especially reoccurring ones, is simple. This approach however does not reveal the reasons and motivations behind the accumulated data and cannot explain why some campaigns succeed while others do not.

Metrics and specifically feedback allows for incremental change in communications. The possibility of testing and real-time feedback, whether in the form of numbers provided by the platform or direct feedback by the audience is seen as one of the biggest benefits of social media. Meanwhile, as campaigns in large NPOs are planned with multifunctional teams and developed for a long time, reacting to feedback is sometimes laborious.

Campaigns are planned and developed with some assumptions in mind, so it might be hard to change direction in the middle of it. On social media, of course we should be testing all kinds of content and choose what content to make more based on what works... Ongoing communication for example about international aid can react and change from time to time...we are moving into that direction. (Kujanpää 2017)

Goal setting is being refined and developed according to the interviewees. Currently, determining the success of a campaign is based on maximising a metric, for example exposure or reach, link clicks to the website, engagements/shares/comments, depending on the individual campaign and its purpose (Kujanpää 2017; Paavoseppä 2017). A structured approach to goal setting and assessing success and the reasons behind it seem to be lacking. This was acknowledged by the interviewees and said to be one of the most important areas for improved social media use in the future.

Depending on the organisation, the approach to qualitative metrics varies. For example, they are used to determine what kind of discussions users are having regarding the organisation. The degree to which the discussions are followed and monitored are determined by the communication strategy and depend on goals that have been set. Overall, non-profits are in the process of developing more precise and strategic metrics in order to assess how communication can further organisational goals. According to Seppälä, the need for this type of data analysis, strategic planning and monitoring is established, however the execution and implementation are still in progress (2017).

Some steps into the direction are already being taken: there seems to be an emerging adoption of qualitative metrics to further deepen the analysis and understanding of the audience. As an example, both the WWF Finland the Finnish Red Cross follow online conversations about the organisation and try to evaluate the sentiment of the messages.

Due to resource constraints and the amount of individual conversations however, it is hard to stay up to date on everything that is being discussed in real time. Moreover, the extent and nature of the conversations makes it difficult to assess which of them should receive attention.

Monitoring of the metrics was mentioned as another area of improvement according to practitioners (Kujanpää 2017; Paavoseppä 2017). The Finnish Red Cross only assess the success of campaigns after they have been concluded and evaluate the metrics and the data in the process (Kujanpää 2017). Other metrics of ongoing social media activity is monitored on a monthly basis. Opposed to this, the WWF conducts weekly meetings to discuss social media and prepare posts for the upcoming week. This also includes evaluation of the previous week's contributions and what should be improved upon (Paavoseppä 2017).

Mäkelä notes that some organisations also rely on external websites and tools for analytics to gather quantitative data, for example about online conversations or related posts done by individuals (2017). However, as they are mostly free to use, they offer limited capabilities and requires knowledge of the specific tools. This again is straining resources; therefore, many organisations decide not the adopt third-party tools (Mäkelä 2017).

4.3 Making use of data

Results from data analytics and monitoring are for the most parts confined to the communications department and the employees involved in content creation. In the case the non-profit is using external media agencies, data is being shared with them and vice versa. Sharing information about social media activity and results are noted as possible ways of increasing engagement, both internally and externally. The extent to which this would be beneficial, especially in internal communication, is yet to be determined, as it would require other departments and employees unrelated to the campaigns to be informed.

...It is also a way of participation, so when we measure the successes, it should be communicated externally so that people around the organisation understand the same things and in addition, get excited to be involved and do these things. It is a clear benefit, showing the numbers and telling [others that] 'this is an impactful thing'. But that should be done more... The question is how to communicate it, with a vast organisation [like the Finnish Red Cross]. (Kujanpää 2017)

The constantly changing nature of the platforms' algorithms, aiming to show users relevant and timely content make measuring and analysing the success of content more difficult. Posts and updates that have been able to attract attention and engagement in the past might not be as effective at reaching people now. This also make it harder to evaluate and compare new and old posts, as the nature of the posts has to be different. Metrics that are used to analyse and determine the impact of communication are forced to change with the platform. A short term solution proposed was to focus on a couple of key metrics that enables campaigns to be comparable.

...As the goal setting is not that advanced, so then we use very, very simple [metrics], how many people are reached with this and this post and count website visitor numbers, for example for news stories and campaign pages and social media reach... while we know that reach is not a very precise measurement... it still describes how well [the post] did. (Kujanpää 2017)

Furthermore, using simple metrics makes it difficult to analyse the reasons and motivations of people for engaging with specific content, e.g., why has a particular contribution been more successful than others. As users quickly become accustomed to the changes and modifications made to the platforms, their preferences change accordingly and they begin to expect different kind of content from organisations. To this regard, Paavoseppä notes that it is important to be among the first to try out new strategies, features and content types to establish what works and what doesn't (2017).

Part of social media and their effects are seen in the form of feedback that informs future decisions regarding communication. Topics or campaigns that receive a great deal of attention are more likely to be recognised and noted by the public and "it makes sense to replicate the posts that work" (Paavoseppä 2017).

Attention in this case refers to the amount of comments, the sentiment and quality of the discussion around the post and how many people are taking notice of the conversation. This is a sign that the topic should be given more attention and prioritised in the future.

Setting priorities and goals that are based on data has enabled WWF to increase the public awareness of other important issues as well. The strategic weight given to specific goals is still the same throughout the organisation, however the "spearheads of communication that receive the most resources and will be promoted the most are more distinct" (Paavoseppä 2017).

One such an example of a successful campaign is Norppa-live, a live video stream that was broadcasting 24/7 from Saimaa Lake and captured the everyday lives of a group of ringed seals. The species is currently endangered and the campaign received a lot of public attention and positive feedback. The momentum created in the process led WWF to take action and allocate resources to the campaign. It also enabled them to reach new users and audiences on Facebook and Twitter and to use it as a "starting point to get the peoples' attention that would have otherwise not necessarily be interested in the organisation and its other objectives" (Paavoseppä 2017).

4.4 Impact

So far the assessment of social media has relied on numbers that can be collected and analysed on the specific platform (Facebook Insights, Twitter Analytics) while more accurate and descriptive methods and metrics are in development to measure impact. However, as the interviewees noted, it is difficult to make conclusions of how social media communications has affected the audience to take concrete actions.

The measuring of impact is very difficult and especially what can be attributed to us...We can say that we have had impact on changing consumer behaviour but we can't say how big that impact has been...It's impossible to say for certain, as no one lives isolated from others. (Paavoseppä 2017)

Empowering people to take action has emerged as a clear goal for social media use. In cases where the public has little to no information about a given topic, the organisations first priority is to create awareness.

This calls for quantitative metrics that can measure the success of a message: reach (organic or paid), engagement rate, click through rate and number of shares.

In such cases, analysing the impact of a message is facilitated by the straightforward data that is produced on the individual platforms where the campaign is being promoted. After this, the goal is for people to be able to take action in their everyday lives (Paavoseppä 2017). Depending on the cause or mission the organisation is advocating for, metrics measuring impact vary. In the case of the WWF and Red Cross, both view impact as real life actions that extend beyond social media, and look for civic engagement and activity. What form this activism takes is up to the individual participant to decide as long as efforts are targeted towards a commonly shared goal, vision or value.

For the interviewed organisations, impact and awareness go hand in hand, and educating the public on issues is important. In most cases, this is the starting point of communication with the aim of providing the public with current and researched data and information on a given issue.

When people don't know that there is something wrong in their consumption habits, we have to create a demand, so inform people that the planet cannot sustain the current lifestyle...According to our values, we have to present solutions to the problems...Our mission is to inform people about the latest research based on scientific facts...and create the demand for people to want to change their way of life. (Paavoseppä 2017)

Current issues and news are cited as a source for communication and social media content, and will be used promote the organisation's work. The audience's interest is heightened and content on different platforms receives more attention. In times of crisis, NPOs are often expected to react and offer information, guidance and opportunities for the public to help as there is an increased awareness and desire to do something. Impact in the case of Red Cross is encouraging people to take action, support the organisation through donations or participate in the organisations work.

For example, in the fall of 2015 when the refugee situation tightened, then a lot of people came to us through social media to volunteer. From the social media channels to the website and through there [people] signed up. But social media is hard to separate from societal conversation, when the [traditional] media picks something up, the interest is very high and then in social media more things go through...but it might not work on a regular Wednesday. (Kujanpää 2017)

While metrics such as reach, the number of comments and shares the discussion/campaign receives provide some insights into the demand for information and how well the public is informed about the subject, it is difficult to assess the impact of the next steps, where people are encouraged to take action. This makes it difficult to connect operations and other activities to social media use and assess its importance and how to develop it further.

However, when enough resources are allocated to the communications department to develop social media use, the results should be easily accessible and understood by all involved in the process. This requires setting specific goals for channels and campaigns and consistently measuring the results.

[With Facebook analytics] you can show for each post how many people are going to the website and how many are signing up... but in [organisations] where concreteness has been discovered, measuring and analysing has become a daily thing and it can be improved. (Seppälä, 2017)

4.5 Social media vs real life actions

Interviewees were concerned that the impact of online communications might be limited to the digital space and not result in concrete actions in the physical world. While the public might agree with the message and even be willing to share it with others, actions such as donations or otherwise participating might not realise when the organisations would need it to. These challenges are in line with research into the topic (see 3.2.2), conducted in the political context of activism, and the interviews show that only incremental progress has been made. Turning online activity and support into activism in the physical world requires clearer goal setting and concretisation of social media goals. Connecting the two dimensions is difficult as well, as activism in the physical world demands more from the audience than sharing content or promoting the cause online.

"In a way, a like [on Facebook] is almost meaningless but it does tell something in the long-term that... people agree with our message and our communication and we uphold a certain set of values." (Kujanpää 2017)

"It is difficult, not everyone gets active and just a like or share does not mean that the person actually does something, for example donate or becomes a member or grabs a friend to go with them to an event." (Mäkelä 2017)

Mäkelä (2017) adds that impact cannot be measured in the short term and simple metrics are not always capable of capturing the impact social media can have. Approaching it as a channel for community building will result in the best long term outcomes and have the greatest impact in society (Mäkelä 2017).

It is not directly that when you are on social media, you instantly get influence or [income] but the most important thing is the community building, in other words, things such as community well being and acting with the community...if we want to achieve societal change, we need a lot of good people in the community behind the issue and they are willing to use their time and resources to share the message onwards. (Mäkelä 2017)

4.6 Old media is the new media (again)

A big part of the impact according to the practitioners is receiving broader attention and be covered in traditional media, such as newspapers and television, as their reach and authority are greater than that of social media (Kujanpää 2017; Paavoseppä 2017). Their importance as a communication channel is unrivalled for the interviewed NPOs, as media attention helps to promote the non-profit's goal and attract new followers and reach wider audiences online as well.

Social media enables us to have our own publishing platform. It's a great way to bypass traditional gatekeepers... But TV is still the most impactful media, no matter what anyone says, it is. And in general, traditional media, like radio and newspapers are still the most impactful media in my opinion...Earned media is essential, without it we would have no reasonable reach. (Paavoseppä 2017)

Due to the amount of content that is being created online, it is hard to identify what information is relevant, trustworthy and should receive attention. This makes traditional media with editorial staff acting as gatekeepers more appealing as information has to be verified and the media enjoys authority in the Finnish society. As Paavoseppä (2017) puts it: "On social media there is a lot of nonsense and other [distractions], so [traditional media] has in some way analysed content and is in context, and it's not just noise."

Social media is seen as an additional way of raising awareness and gaining attention as opposed to replacing traditional outlets. To some extent, separating social and traditional media does not make sense, as information is increasingly shared across all channels and the media is looking for stories online and non-profits are looking for news that are applicable to their cause. Relationships with traditional media organisations and journalists are important while developing social media further.

Today, they can't be separated. We have some examples where we have done a good post and media has picked up on that and made a story about it...and in a couple of days there's a story about a person with really good reach. [Traditional media] is still very important as reach is incredibly good... Public relations and media co-operation are important things. Sometimes they are linked and probably will be more linked in the future. (Kujanpää 2017)

As resources in media organisations are decreasing, our possibility to communicate with them [has increased]...Social media enables that while...our earned media reach is good, but it enables us an addition, as it constantly brings us more opportunities to communicate, there is no one gatekeeper that decides what becomes public. (Paavoseppä 2017)

Another interesting note is the fact that WWF viewed their website and email newsletter as the most important and effective way of reaching their audiences. The justification was that while social media channels are growing at a fast pace, they are only "borrowed" content platforms, whereas a website is fully controlled by the organisation (Paavoseppä 2017). Many posts and content do not allow for direct action on the platform, therefore directing the audience to the website of the organisation is logical. On the other hand, this requires additional effort by the user and might not appeal to them, which can lead to the discrepancy in social media reach and attention and concrete actions (see section 4.5).

4.7 Changing times

The first step and biggest challenge mentioned in the interviews for developing social media in non-profits was goal setting and a strategic approach to each channel. While all interviewees were aware of the need for planning and integration to broader organisational goals and mission, it had not yet translated into concrete action. Therefore, analysis of relevant metrics and assessment of content are conducted on a superficial level while neglecting the actual purpose of communications.

We should be asking why [organisations] want to increase reach, goals are derived from that question. And then we get to the core, 'we want to increase the reach because we want more awareness or we want to change the public opinion or we want to influence decision making or we want more members'... And with a concrete goal like that, we can measure it. (Seppälä 2017)

The benefits of defining concrete goals for social media that are measurable and support decision making and overall strategy can be seen when such practices are implemented. This creates a feedback loop that increases the quality of the content and further helps the organisation achieve its goals.

In organisations where concrete goals have been found, then social media use has also been planned better, content-wise and the small amount of time available can be used effectively, because we know what kind of content should be made. But also so that administrators that make specific content towards a specific goal, they also make it a practice to constantly monitor the success of the content... So analytics on for example Facebook has been better understood... And so you can further the organisational goal, for example attracting new members, a post at a time. (Seppälä 2017)

Lacking concrete goals that support the organisation's mission and operations impairs how well social media are being used: strategic planning cannot be incorporated in the process and therefore communications is seen as a secondary and separate part which in turn leads to resource constraints. This limits the effective use of the new channels and identifying further opportunities on said channels. For Seppälä, the first step would be to allow for further analysis and monitoring of social media use to be able to prove that strategic goals are being supported and achieved effectively on the platforms.

If there is enough time to analyse successes and on that basis develop a social media strategy, after that the justification [for more resources] towards management is better and easier. In my view, when we have the time to work strategically, through that we can show to management that 'communication has to be developed in this direction on this specific channel to achieve these results' and also that the goals are linked to the whole organisation's goals and not just the social media use and that social media supports the organisation's operations. (Seppälä 2017)

Social media additionally affected the priorities of other employees: as more and more of the workforce are engaging digitally, communication has been democratised. This has enabled NPOs to make use of each individual's expertise in their field and maintain a presence where otherwise the limited resources would have not allowed. However, communication by individuals, while more free and well-received by audiences (Mäkelä 2017; Paavoseppä 2017) is less strategic.

While employees are encouraged to make use of social media as themselves, this limits planning specific content and ensuring it promotes the organisations goals. Communication and content by individuals is more accessible and perceived as more trustworthy and authentic than that of an organisation. For this reason, enabling employees with sufficient training to engage on social media is a good option.

We should all be part of the communication because when an organisation is communicating [on social media], that is great. But when an individual related to the organisation, like a member or an active person, board member, or whoever communicates, his or her message is believed 6 times more often than... organisational communication. (Mäkelä 2017)

For example, the Red Cross has started adding social media coaching when training delegates that go to work in the field. As the cycles are extensive, it can take up to years until a trained person is sent to work on the site, therefore immediate results cannot be seen. Participation of volunteers and experts is seen as a source of potential improved communications that has not been made use of extensively.

"It's a little bit difficult, a difficult thing... it requires planning, guidance and training and so on. So that's where we're stuck. But we acknowledge it, that it's a future [area of improvement]." (Kujanpää 2017)

Furthermore, employees' individual participation on social media has also affected the organisation. As witnessed by the WWF, the number of followers, the reach of individual posts and the engaging has increased on the organisations profiles with broader adoption of social media by employees. However, Paavoseppä notes that it is difficult to assess to what extent and which parts of the increases can be attributed to actions taken by individuals (2017).

The future of social media is seen as a more interactive, participatory way of engaging with the public, with widespread adoption of social media communication in the organisation. In a way communications in general will become democratised, especially in organisations with resource constraints. It would ease the workload of the appointed practitioners and facilitate in establishing a coherent yet multifaceted presence online.

All interviewees agreed that making dividing responsibility and allowing volunteers, experts and other members to participate in communications provides opportunities and is the direction in which NPOs should move. For Finnish NPOs, this means training staff, adopting new platforms and technology, securing sufficient resources for communications and staying up to date with the audience's changing preferences. While the field is well established and NPOs are generally seen as authoritative and trustworthy in Finland, organisations are slow to open up their operations to the public and adopt a more transparent and participatory way of working. This might affect the public's willingness to participate formally and offer the opportunity for informal networks and groups to take action.

5 Discussion & conclusion

The findings, although only applicable to the organisations interviewed, show some shared beliefs held by the practitioners and corresponding actions taken: while social media are being viewed and adopted increasingly as viable communication channels, the benefits are difficult to evaluate. Measuring the impact and results of the communication proves to be difficult and goal setting and strategic planning is still in development.

At the core, how to approach this issue remains unresolved: whether to first set strategic goals and plan content accordingly with the help of extensive metrics to assess if social media communication is successful or begin by testing different kinds of content and learn to measure based on what content furthers the organisation's goals and mission best. So far it seems that the latter approach has been adopted by practitioners.

5.1 Employees using social media

The democratisation of information distribution and the participatory nature of the platforms enable for greater interactivity and the audience to have their voices heard, show support and give instant feedback. Employees are encouraged to use social media freely to be more accessible and enhance the organisational image. It is important to note that such action has to be voluntary as it otherwise would decrease motivation and therefore the quality of the content. Seppälä suspects that in the future, social media will be an integrated part of everyone's work and not be seen as a separate tool or activity but as "the way things are done" (2017). This could be compared to the use of the internet in today's world, where it is not seen as a specific tool but at the core of almost all activity and therefore not limited to one department's responsibility or operations.

If employees are encouraged and trained to use social media, it could provide NPOs opportunities to reach new audiences and increase the authenticity of communication (see section 4.7) while still representing the brand.

However, training employees that are otherwise not as active and engaged online as the practitioners requires time and resources. If the person does not feel comfortable using the platforms, contributions might not be effective in communicating a coherent message. Additionally, inadequate training may lead to problems for the organisations communication and public image. If individual opinions and perspectives do not coincide, the message might be distorted and misunderstood by the public. It is crucial to distinguish between content created using the authority of the organisation and individual opinions. As this line becomes more blurred and traditional hierarchical authority granted based on status is being replaced by earned authority, employees need to be careful as to what, when and where to share their thoughts. Negative reactions, criticism and how to handle them need to be the focus when training employees on social media use.

5.2 Sophistication of metrics

Based on the interviews, it seems that metrics vary depending on organisation, the nature of campaigns and goals a campaign is set to achieve. Commonly, quantitative metrics such as reach, engagement rates, shares/likes/reactions are measured in depth and analysed. These metrics give a simple and easily understandable overview of the success of the post or campaign.

Metrics that are used to assess communication impact seem to be relatively new and rudimentary while advanced options and further development are being explored. Reliance of a few basic metrics is prevalent while the need for more thorough analysis e.g. comment analysis and other qualitative metrics that seek to explain why specific content is receiving more attention.

In the context of individual organisations, the mission and operational goals have immense impact on how social media are approached and what kind of goals are set for them. Specifically, non-profits that experience more pressure to make efficient use of donation based funds could have a difficult time convincing donors or the management to increase resource allocation to communication. The conflicting needs of those an organisation is trying to help/advocate for and internal resources spending are at odds and organisations have to balance the two.

To resolve this conflict, established and future research can illuminate how implementing practices and methods from the private sector could increase efficiency and impact of social media communication.

5.3 New technology and opportunities

As access to technology and methods of communication continue to increase in the future, the opportunities for non-profits have to be acted upon by practitioners. This progress is further facilitated by the evolving platforms and their improving built-in analysis tools, and the broader recognition that social media can and will help organisations achieve their goals. As pointed out in this thesis, NPOs are already reacting to this new environment and its demands and will most likely keep doing so in the future.

With the increase of available platforms and ways of communicating, choosing which platform to engage on and how becomes increasingly complicated, as users seek out new channels and content: the question of whether to focus on few channels and consistently communicate through them to a limited audience or to explore newer platforms with the hopes of reaching a wider audience, remains.

Overall, social media are seen as a constantly evolving endeavour that requires learning and exploring new opportunities. Quantifying past successes does not guarantee future success, while adopting new channels is a risky effort: establishing a presence on an emerging platform could be beneficial as competition for attention is relatively low, however, due to the lack of guidelines and commonly accepted norms the content might not reach the intended audiences. Furthermore, the size of the potentially reachable audience might not justify investing resources in a specific channel.

In the broader context, social media offers ways for anyone to express their opinions and the lack of verifiable information and blurring lines between authority, expertise and subjective viewpoints can hinder non-profits' ability to make use of social media.

As audience's become more fragmented and create their own spaces for reinforcing existing opinions, social media might create isolated groups that cannot or are not willing to engage with each other. For any NPO to succeed, it is crucial to reach and engage with a broad spectrum of individuals of the public. In the age of social media and online communication, pushback towards scientific research and objective data might be harsher. Reacting to criticism and hostile comments are essential skills in order to maintain a credible presence on digital platforms.

Interestingly, the value of traditional media has not changed, or has even increased in the past years which is in line with previous research in the Finnish context. According to research, NPOs valued social media as an important part of their communication mix, however the perceived prestige and authority of newspaper, television and radio has not changed (Honkala & Nissinen 2012). This is still the case in 2017: rather than replacing old media, social media have become an effective addition to organisations communication in order to reach new audiences and raise awareness about issues that they hope to be picked up by traditional media.

The consensus among interviewed practitioners is that social media are a way of supporting traditional communication channels and facilitate reaching these gatekeepers of public discussion. Additionally, the impact is seen in the reach and effective communication with stakeholders, especially people who are interested in the cause (donors, supporters, members, etc.).

This showcases that the full potential of social media has either not been fully understood or not made use of. One reason for such use or lack thereof could be that the NPO field in Finland is fairly established and while new organisations and movements are being founded, they tend to be relatively small in size, focused on a local and specific cause. Furthermore, according to research by Honkala and Nissinen (2012), younger demographics prefer to organise informally to affect change in society. More traditional organisations might struggle to change their behaviour and ways of operating and adapt to the new reality of communication slower than needed.

5.4 Framework for the future

Practitioners are struggling with measuring impact: implications of change in public opinion and discourse can sometimes be attributed to successful communication and campaigns, yet the extent to which said impact can be assigned to individual organisations remains questionable. In order to make more effective use of the limited budgets that non-profits are working with, this is clearly a priority in the further development of data gathering and analysis.

Developing a framework for measuring impact that aides in decision making and can be used in setting and achieving strategic goals should be a priority for all organisations, whether for-profit or NPOs. As apparent by the statements made in the interviews, the need for effective communication on digital channels is crucial as audiences are migrating to these spaces. The complexity of the organisations operations and purpose might not allow for a framework that can be applied everywhere, however general guidelines as to how to measure impact and make use of social media data is one of the core issues all participating organisations struggle with.

To this complexity adds the fact that actions need to be taken in the physical world as well for change to happen. Connecting the two dimensions of impact will likely become more complex while at the same time the distinction between the two is becoming more blurred.

5.5 Conclusion

The methods of measuring impact in non-profit organisations are currently lacking a sophisticated framework against which to measure the used metrics against. As the tools for data analysis keep improving and the range of available data points increases, NGO will have to decide which ones to adopt in order to benefit the most from them. This has to be done in the context of the organisation's operational goals and strategy. As social media and communication in general become an integral part of all departments, resources will need to be allocated towards educating and training staff as well as ensuring a coherent online image and presence. Specifically, handling negative discussions and crisis communication should receive attention, as these areas have traditionally been outsourced to public relation experts.

This development will further strain the limited resources at non-profits' disposal however it is necessary in order to receive the attention of the public, as the whole population is increasingly moving online. Balancing communication and organisational strategy in the short-term, before complete integration, might result in confusion and conflict within the organisation. Priorities have to be rearranged to make the most use of social media channels and benefit in the long-term.

The growing importance of analytics will offer advantages to the NGOs that are capable of making use of them strategically. However, as evidenced by the interviews, this aspect of communication is slowly emerging and currently lacking clear direction and examples. Moving towards more comprehensive metrics and analysis methods could help NGOs discover new ways of making use of social media and plan communication strategically.

So far this perspective seems to be lacking at the organisational level of the studied organisations. Measuring impact should not be limited to numbers and quantifiable data but rather seek to discover the underlying motivations of the audience's behaviour. Numbers alone are not enough to explain the actions of the target audience and might hinder the production of relevant and successful content in the future, as the platforms will change. Optimistically speaking, tools for this purpose are likely to be developed and become more accessible at the same time. Adapting these tools and making use of the generated data, and supporting decision making should be a priority for communication practitioners going forward.

6 Limitations and further research

The thesis does not seek to establish a generally applicable measurement framework for non-profit organisations using social media nor does it seek to generalise the findings in the Finnish context. Rather, based on the interviews conducted, the purpose is to seek answers to how well the chosen Finnish NPOs are prepared to measure the impact of social media and what parts of their measurement systems they are looking to develop further in the future. As the interviews are based on qualitative research, the results can only be descriptive of the interviewees' points of view as to how well the currently used metrics can be used in decision making and achieving organisational goals. The results should be regarded as examples of social media use in Finnish non-profits and can provide some insights as to how well a strategic approach to digital communication has been adopted.

Due to the the constraints, the sample size for the thesis is small and limits drawing broader conclusions from the conducted interviews. This might also limit the validity of the research, as the non-profits interviewed were both large, international and based in Helsinki. A broader sample of organisations of different sizes, causes and locations could result in different conclusions and make up a more applicable overview of the field. Answers given in the interviews are highly subjective to the specific organisation and should be read as such. The depth of the answers however does provide some insight into the ways and practices that non-profit organisations have adopted in Finland.

The thesis is not concerned with the cultural perspective of communication. Due to this, it does not try to explain why specific content gains wider attention than other, but takes the cultural setting of Finland and the channels as given. Further research could elaborate on the meaning of cultural aspects that define social media communication for NPOs and explain the differences in communication in other countries. A comparison of different cultures and their effect on the impact of social media communication could provide insights and recommendations for NPOs.

All of the interviews were conducted with practitioners that hold a special interest in the organisations, i.e. as employees, they have an incentive to represent the organisation to external audiences in a certain way. This might affect the given answers and results drawn from them. Critical inspection and assessment of the conclusions is therefore warranted.

Furthermore, the approach of the research using qualitative methods is inherently biased based on the interviewers and interviewees previous experiences and relations to the organisation and other cognitive heuristics that affect human social interaction. The narrow focus and chosen perspective also does not attempt to recognise how social media communication is perceived by the audience and therefore does not address the conflict of perceived organisational impact and the actual real world impact as experienced by the public. This would be present an opportunity for research to discover public attitudes towards NPO's use of social media and how impactful it is.

A critical issue is the lack of similar studies that would provide reliability to the established results of the thesis. No framework has yet established what kind of metrics should be used by organisations to measure and assess their impact. The issue remains unresolved while the need for such a framework is clear: NPOs compete for financing, the attention of the public and how to migrate their operations and practices into the digital world. If no clear purpose or direction is established, non-profits might not be able to keep up with the ever-changing demands and expectations and fail to have impact on society. This topic certainly warrants further study and discussion as no definitive answers are yet available and the importance is going to increase as more communications move online and onto social media platforms.

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Appendix 1 Details of interviewees

Mari Paavoseppä, Digital Producer, World Wildlife Foundation Finland

Interviewed on the 5.4.2017 at 14.00 (Duration: 82 minutes)

M.P.S, University of Helsinki

Background in journalism with extensive experience in the Finnish TV and internet news broadcasting. With WWF since 2014

Seppo Kujanpää, Web Producer, Finnish Red Cross

Interviewed on 12.4.2017 at 9.30 (Duration: 57 minutes)

M.Phil., University of Helsinki

Background as archivist, research assistant and archivist. Working for the Red Cross since 2014.

Piritta Seppälä, Communications Consultant, Viestintä Piritta

Interviewed on 19.4.2017 at 15.00 (Duration: 38 minutes)

M.Arts & Media, Tampere University of Applied Sciences

Founder & CEO of Viestintä-Piritta Oy, working with social media for NPOs for over 7 years. Extensive background of working in the field of non-profits (15+ years)

Pauliina Mäkelä, Communications Consultant, Viestintä Piritta Oy/Kinda Oy

Interviewed on 21.4.2017 (Duration: 58 minutes)

Founder & CEO of Kinda Oy, consultant at Viestintä-Piritta Oy. Background working for Nokia and non-profit communication since 2010.

Appendix 2 Interview questions with translations

Millaisia tavoitteita organisaatio on asettanut sosiaalisessa mediassa viestinnälle?
(*What kind of goals has the organisation set for itself for social media communication?*)

Miten tavoitteet asetetaan? (*How are the goals determined?*)

Kuinka suunnitelmallista sosiaalisen median käyttö on organisaatiossa? (*How structured/strategic is the use of social media in the organisation?*)

Miten sosiaalisen median viestintää mitataan? (*How is communication measured on social media?*)

Millaisia mittareita organisaatio käyttää mittaamiseen? (*What metrics are used by the organisation?*)

Miten mittaaminen ja datan analyysi on muuttanut organisaation viestintää sosiaalisessa mediassa? (*How has the use of metrics and analysis of data changed the communication on social media?*)

Kuinka tärkeitä ovat kvantitatiiviset mittarit vs kvalitatiiviset mittarit kun mitataan sosiaalisen median viestinnän vaikutuksellisuutta? (*What weight does the company give to quantitative vs qualitative metrics when measuring the impact of messages/contributions on social media?*)

Kuinka usein mittaristoa tarkastellaan/raportoidaan ja kuka siitä on vastuussa? (*How often and who reviews and monitors metrics?*)

Kuinka paljon mitattavuuteen kiinnitetään huomiota viestinnän suunnittelussa ja miten tämä näkyy suunnitteluvaiheessa? (*How much attention is given to the use of metrics and how is this visible in the planning phase of social media communication, i.e. how does it affect the communication plan for social media?*)

Kuinka paljon resursseja organisaatio keskittää sosiaalisen median viestintään? (*How much resources are allocated to the use of social media in communications?*)

Kuinka vahvasti sosiaalinen media on osa koko viestintää: onko se erillään muusta viestinnästä vai ei? (*Is social media a separate entity of marketing communications or is it integrated?*)

Kuinka dataa/mittaustuloksia käytetään päätöksenteossa /strategian suunnittelussa?
(*How are the data/results used in decision making or strategic planning?*)

Kuinka hyvin tämän hetkinen mittaristo tukee päätöksentekoa? (*How well do the currently used metrics support decision making?*)

Kuinka usein mittareita/tavoitteita muutetaan? Miksi? (*How often are social media metrics/goals changed and why?*)

Mikä on organisaation näkökulmasta onnistunutta viestintää sosiaalisessa mediassa? Millä mittareilla tämä mitataan? (*What constitutes a successful campaign/message/communication strategy for the company? What kind of metrics are used to assess this?*)

Kuinka paljon alustojen jatkuva muuttuminen vaikuttaa tulosten mittaamiseen ja niistä johdettuihin päätöksiin? (*How does the constant changing of the platforms affect the use of metrics and the conclusions drawn from the analysis of used metrics?*)

Kuinka organisaatio aikoo käyttää sosiaalista mediaa tulevaisuudessa? Puuttuuko tämän hetken mittaamistyökaluista jotain joka helpottaisi viestinnän mittaamista? (*How will the organisation use social media in the future? Does the current framework of metrics lack something in order to make better use of it?*)

Millä tavalla sosiaalisen median käyttöä ja mittaamista pitäisi kehittää jotta se tukisi organisaation tavoitteita enemmän? (*In what way should the use of social media and its metrics be developed in order to better support organisational goals?*)