Getting through to your audience: Helping not-for-profits increase dialogue with stakeholders

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Abstract

Community not-for-profit (NFP) organisations face considerable challenges trying to reach those who need their information and services. These barriers to effective communication can be traced back to monetary, human resource and knowledge constraints as they are competing against commercial organisations with resources. In a social media environment that prioritises and boosts, sponsored and ad-based content over organic content, NFPs are finding it hard to reach and be heard by their target audience. While effective communication strategies can help tip the scales, there is a divide in NFP communication between those organisations who have the resources to take part in online communication and those who do not, a divide that is exasperated by factors such as digital competence, economy, age, cognitive abilities, access to technology and internet. This paper backgrounds ongoing PhD research that will use Schoenmaker's (2014) Engagement Framework and Excellence Theory (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) to offer Western Sydney NFPs a tool to narrow that divide, ensuring they become more effective in their communication and ultimately, meet their advocacy intentions. The project will investigate how Western Sydney based NFPs can use social media communication to generate online engagement that enhances their ability to build trust, cultivate genuine dialogue and 'relate' to their target audience in a strategically effective manner. Netnography, a specialised methodology that helps understand communication and cultural experiences in online environments, will be used to extract insights[1].

Introduction

Currently, the Australian not-for-profit (NFP) sector is facing a period of change which comes with significant sector challenges and despite growing rates of social media usage globally, Australian NFPs aren't investing in the most direct and efficient way to communicate with donors and beneficiaries; being social media (Litchfield, 2018). While this could be due to many reasons including a lack of resources, knowledge and skills, there is a critical need to explore how NFPs can be strategic in their communication, particularly through an enhanced use of digital platforms and tools that foster participatory engagement.

NFPs play a fundamental role in Australian society as they deliver much needed services, support and expertise and add to social cohesion by providing a safety net when government services are overstretched or missing. According to Dillion et al., (2021, p. 3), 'Australia's not-for-profit sector is critical to meeting fundamental societal needs and fostering social cohesion. It is also an important part of the economy.' There is a global trend of governments failing to adequately address social crises which in turn place 'additional pressure on non-profit organisations to meet increasing demands to care for those in need.' Montgomery (2020, p. 3) goes on to explain that '[t]here is no indication that the need for non-profit organisations and the support they provide will decrease in the foreseeable future.' In fact, she feels that it is likely that the need for these organisations will increase. As the nation recovers from the economic impacts of COVID-19, governments will be looking to make budget savings that could impact non-profits the hardest. For this reason, it is imperative that NFPs maximise the communication opportunities offered by social media as their target audience is looking for information. Social media has also changed the communication landscape and the way that charities promote their messages.

Research opportunity

There is a need to conduct research in this space with the view to developing a framework that NFPs can use to structure their social media communication in a way that is proactive, strategic and will achieve 'relating' (Schoenmaker, 2014). This research which has Western Sydney University Ethics Approval H15853, has the potential to make a grassroots difference. Providing effective services to a growing consumer base requires impactful and highly coordinated strategic communication. For the NFP sector, creating positive change through strategic communication is critical. Strategic communication helps build awareness of support for, and trust in, the NFP sector. As Janetzki (2022) says, trust underpins the public's connection with NFPs, and a strong and trusting relationship with their followers will encourage funding and community support. It will also increase the organisation's potential impact in its chosen area and help them achieve their advocacy goals. The differences in budget and human resources due to limited financial and knowledge resources that exist between commercial organisations and NFPs mean that for many, their ability to work on their community-based initiatives are reactive (rather than strategic). This research will address how they can build trust and be strategic within the dynamics of the NFP sector.

What is Netnography, and how will it be used in this research?

Netnography is a qualitative research method that studies online communities, their behaviour and activities in a digital space (Heath, 2023). It is systematic and involves observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups, analysis and interpretation of online data and allows researchers to explore 'the universe of social media' in a manner that recognises its complexities, evolution, experiential nature, communication peculiarities and cultural qualities (Kozinets, 2020, p. 4). Netnography assists in the understanding of how social structures, hierarchies, and norms are used to create meaning in online communities. In industry, netnography is used to understand consumer behaviour, identify influencers and opinion leaders, monitor brand reputation and inform marketing strategies (Heath, 2023).

As demonstrated in Figure 1, the three fundamental pillars of netnography are investigation, interaction and immersion. These pillars are used to help the researcher explore social truths and cultural understandings experienced in the universe of social media with its own communication affordances (Kozinets, 2020). As the social media universe is ever-changing, it can be a hard research environment to traverse but, 'netnograghy is both a telescope and a microscope' which helps explore the unknown (Kozinets, personal communication, 26 July 2023). It helps make the 'invisible visible' (Kozinets, personal communication, 28 July 2023).
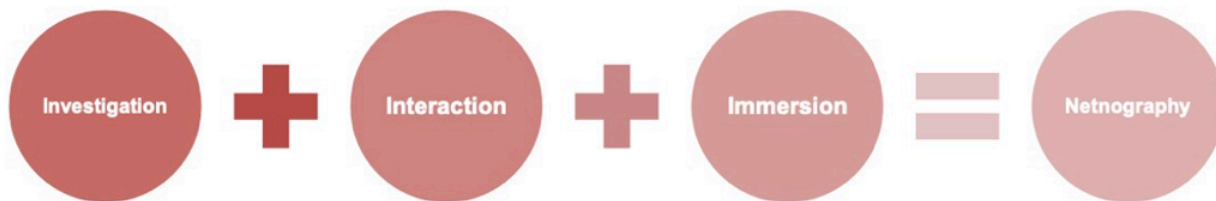

Figure 1: The Pillars of Netnography (developed by Campbell, 2023)

Social media communication encompasses more than just words; it involves understanding the use of emotions, emojis, shares, likes, giphys, community-based language. The nuisances of the communication environment means that social media research requires an innovative research approach such as netnography. Importantly, netnography is flexible and can use participant observation to supplement online data (Fenton & Procter, 2019). In this study, interviews will supplement the observations made and will gather qualitative data by conversing with relevant social media administrators within the NFP parent support environment. This will deepen the understanding of the insights gathered from participant observation (Kozinets, 2020; Fenton & Procter, 2019).

Hearing from those who administer and develop content for social media sites is extremely important, but it is also important to experience how their efforts are translating on their digital platforms. An observation process captured via an immersion journal will also help record insights of what is happening in practice. An immersive journal contains:

- Descriptions that combine what the researcher sees on the screen and experiences
- Screen captures and data downloads with notes on the researcher's impressions
- Interactions
- Events
- Subjective meaning of interaction and events as experienced by the researcher with the added dimension of time
- What happens and how it feels
- Initial thoughts about what observations may mean
- Time and date stamps as it is a recording (Kozinets, 2020, p. 292).

Producing an immersion journal provokes a systematic engagement with the research topic at regular intervals and for an extended period as it helps the researcher focus on being present in the moment of the experience and to be analytical at the time rather than at a later point known as a 'solitary future moment' (Kozinets, 2020, p. 293).

This approach will be used to gauge how diverse the digital ecosystem is in which NFPs are working and to explore the nuisances of the 'consumer' base they are trying to reach. It will allow the following questions to be explored:

- How social media can be used to support NFPs as a group that has a very distinct potential catchment.
- NFPs have a complex and diverse audience base which poses a challenge for those who are trying to communicate with them via social media. Which channels are they engaging with for what types of communication?
- Where are they searching for answers to their parenting questions?
- Who do they believe online?
- What communication strategies can NFPs employ to help meet their communication objectives?

Strategic communication

In the discipline of professional communication, strategic communication refers to planned messaging systems, principles and tactics that are purposefully designed to help an organisation achieve its objectives, usually for information or persuasive purposes (Rodgers, 2018; Smith, 2017). Often incorporating communication fields such as promotion, campaigning, issues management, and public affairs, strategic communication typically relies on a designed combination of paid, owned, earned, and shared strategies that emphasise the effective management of stakeholder relations with the aim of realising organisational goals (Rodgers, 2018). When carried out effectively, strategic communication corresponds with the organisation's overall strategic plan that outlines what it seeks to accomplish with the aid of purposefully designed activities, key messages and tactics (Smith, 2017). Strategic communication is important in the trust building process. Additionally, trust is an important concept for NFPs as their stakeholders must believe in the organisation if they are to engage.

Non-profits have interesting and complex marketing challenges as they are focused on achieving arrange of non-financial objectives that stem from their social mission and need for advocacy. This makes them different to commercial organisation and as such, commercial-based theories and practices may not directly transfer to the not-for-profit sectors marketing and communications activities as NFPs use marketing tools and techniques differently (Kubacki & Szablewska, 2020). Utilising netnography will ensure that the nuisances of NFP social communication is understood in the context of their advocacy and community assistance mission.

As a discipline, scholars and practitioners are at the forefront of functional change but there is an opportunity to shift the focus, be more analytical and draw on insights to inform communication theory and strategy moving forward, especially in the optimisation of social media platforms such as Facebook for community building and engagement (Baker, 2023). As Condie (2022) has argued, 'Facebook is often used as a one-way broadcast mechanism, and there are missed opportunities for 'two-way' conversations.' More contemporary researchers such as Bridges et al., (2019) echo this sentiment and encourage the sector to be strategic in their approach. Condie (2022) recommends that more research is needed into creating dedicated specialist resources for NFPs that will support them in using social media to build online communities and relationships with their stakeholders.

Corporate versus not-for-profit strategic communication

A not-for-profit's ability to deliver a benefit to their community depends on the level of public trust and good will that they possess (Kubacki & Szablewska, 2020). They also believe that non-profit marketing consists of three distinctive activities:

1. Increasing the number of people benefiting from the work of the non-profit
2. Marketing the social issue(s) that the organisation is passionate about and raising societies awareness of these issues and potentially attracting volunteers
3. Fundraising so they can continue their activities

Further, they argue that non-profit or social marketing tries to achieve social change through the implementation of strategies and tactics that will achieve the not-for-profits social goals. It is also interesting to note that scholars currently believe that the 'clash between corporate-driven marketing and public participation on social media invites us to refocus on the value and necessity of community-based relationship marketing.' (Hou cited in Rishi, & Bandyopadhyay, 2017, p. 31). This research will explore this topic further to explore how social marketing, with a focus on NFPs, can increase awareness of the social issue, attract volunteers all while raising funds that will enable them to benefit the community.

NFPs need outcomes from their strategic communication as they don't have the luxury of communicating for the sake of building 'top of mind awareness'. They need results and they need to achieve outcomes such as recruiting members and volunteers, attracting support, funding and donations while encouraging social change. They need to achieve these tangible outcomes literally on the smell of an oily rag.

Volunteering in Australia

Australians have a proud history of volunteering which helps fill this funding and service void. The Australian non-profit workforce is made up of paid and volunteer workers and accounts for 11.5 per cent of the total Australian workforce, of this, three per cent is volunteer labour (Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing, 2023). As non-profit organisations are focused on achieving their mission of adding to the social fabric of their community, they are acutely aware of the need to attract greater community support for their cause (Montgomery 2020).

In Australia, volunteers contribute approximately 489.5 million hours of unpaid work in the community per year (Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing, 2023). They provide tremendous support to our local communities, however, the benefit derived from volunteering suffers from a lack of understanding and recognition. Combine this with an ever-evolving communication environment and charities continue to face new challenges that they need assistance to address. They know that they need to attract greater community support for their causes (Montgomery, 2020). They are stretching their volunteer time to provide information and services to those in need while facing increasing pressure to engage with the community via social media. In the process, they are competing for followers in a market where a lot of commercial organisations have big budgets that allow them to boost and create engaging content. Charities don't have the budget to pay for social media expertise or to pay for views and as a result they are questioning if their social media activities are resulting in positive outcomes or, if it is taking resources away from their core mission.

Facebook and not-for-profit community building

As one of the original social media platforms and due to its ease of use that that gave NFPs the opportunity to attract followers, Facebook has become the favoured social media platform of Australian community organisations. Bridges (2016) studied closed Facebook pages used by the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) and how mothers felt about finding breastfeeding information and support in these groups. Not only did Bridges (2016) make some valuable insights into how to conduct research via Facebook, but she also identified what mothers were looking for in a supportive online breastfeeding community. She identified that mothers are looking for support, community, complementary and immediacy in their closed ABA Facebook pages. When defining these concepts, Bridges (2016) defines these key concepts as follows:

- Support – practical and valuable information that gives members confidence and empowers them
- Community – place where they could meet other like-minded women, in a safe and private environment where there was a sense of reciprocity. Members felt a feeling of connectedness.
- Complementary – information and services that are complementary to those offered by ABA in real life. An extension of their face-to-face service offering.
- Immediacy – information is provided in a timely manner as required by the online community member. Users interact, often daily, to help and check up on one another.

Bridges' (2016) research found that closed Facebook groups have an increased sense of privacy and safety for members compared to open Facebook pages. Through the support that members received via the closed Facebook page, users gained a sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Getting this support in an immediate manner was identified by members as a key benefit of their continued membership of the Facebook page. She concluded that from the point of view of boundary spanning, the most meaningful relationships are built when people feel that they are part of a supportive Facebook community that is reinforced with positive and complimentary face-to-face interactions. The relationship fostered via Facebook can value-add and enhance the face-to-face communication that the ABA has with its stakeholders. The online and the face-to-face existed together for the most powerful outcomes for its members.

Closed Facebook groups can help communicate with tech savvy users as Facebook has 93 per cent of social media users in Australia (Sensis, 2015) and our community is becoming increasingly reliant on social media for research, entertainment and connecting purposes. The next generation is more likely to use social media to research health related information and to seek out support then previous generations so knowing how to appeal and motivate this audience to relate (Schoenmaker, 2014) is extremely important to the sustainability of a NFP such as the ABA (Bridges, 2016).

In conclusion, the literature illustrates how the following themes are important to the understanding of this topic, message content, composition, communication model, trust, credibility, emotional attachment, frequency of interaction and pre-existing real-world connection. However, there are gaps as many research projects focus on commercial or not-for-profits organisations (e.g., universities) with larger cash flows and human resources than the average

Australian charity. Concepts are illuminating as they show the bigger picture, but they lack real world practical advice for charities who are already struggling due to a lack of human and financial resources.

Theoretical context and the role of Netnography

The role of NFPs and their communication needs has been insufficiently studied from a theoretical perspective. In this respect Condie (2022) has argued, 'Facebook is often used as a one-way broadcast mechanism, and there are missed opportunities for 'two-way' conversations.' More contemporary researchers (e.g. Bridges, 2016; Goncalves & Oliveira, 2022) echo this sentiment and encourage the sector to be strategic in their approach. Developing a framework will give the NFP sector a tool to ensure their communication through social media is strategic, engaging and proactive moving forward. This section will outline the theoretical context of this ongoing research.

Two main strategic communication theories are central to this research. One is a social media engagement framework by Schoenmaker (2014) and the second is Excellence Theory, a communication theory by Grunig and Hunt (1984). Figure 2 illustrates how Schoenmaker's (2014) work will help provide a mechanism for understanding the quality and meaningfulness of any online relationships that are being observed while Excellence Theory (1985) will help describe the flow of information between the organisation and their followers and identify any power imbalances.
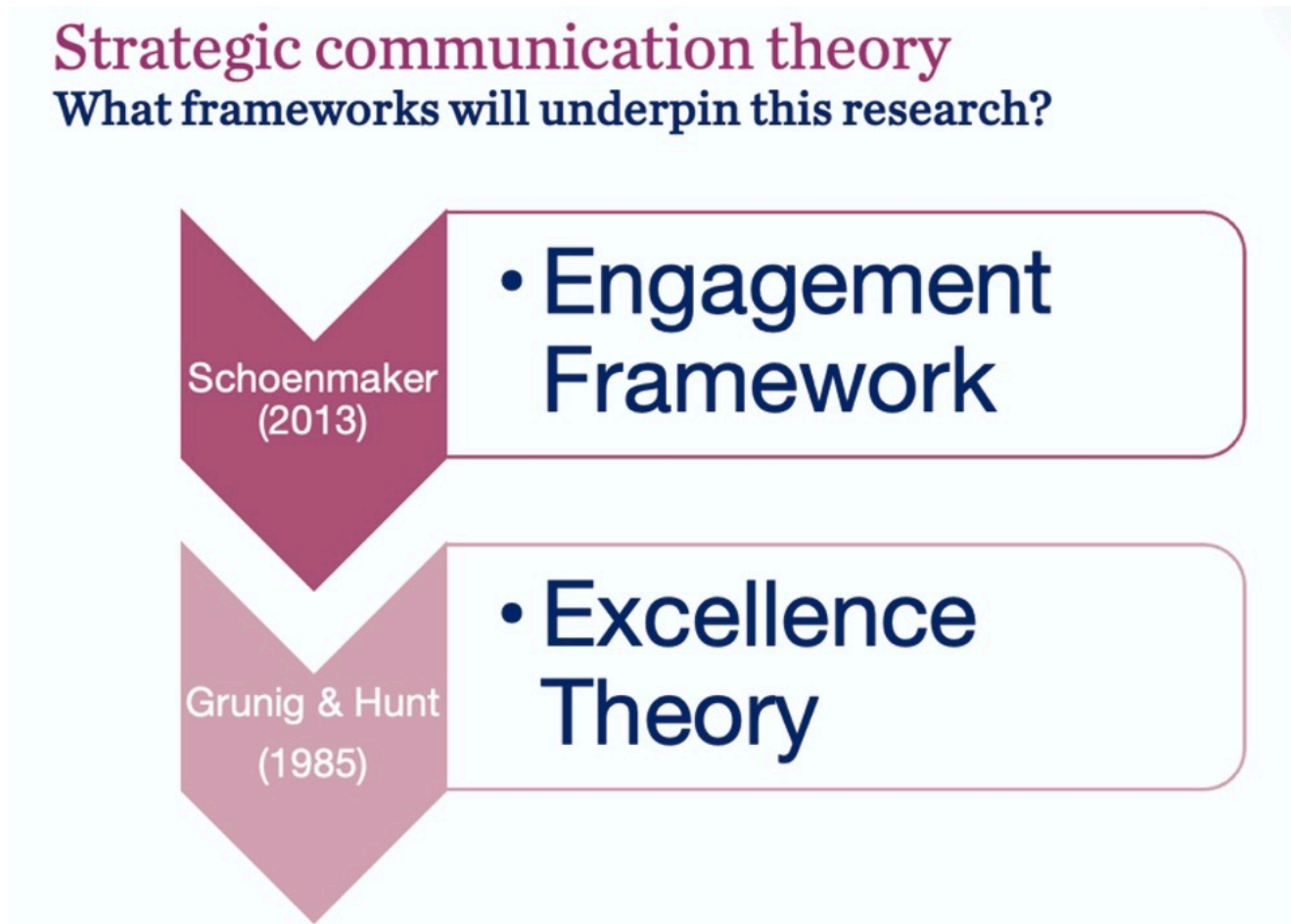

Figure 2: Strategic Communication Theory Framework (developed by Campbell, 2023)

Schoenmaker's engagement framework identifies five types of online engagement: Entry level engagement starts with conversing and the gold standard is at the other end of the continuum in relating. Relating is when a relationship is forged that is authentic, transparent and which encourages followers to interact with the organisation. This interaction is meaningful and can have positive benefits in the real world – not just online. Schoenmaker (2014, p. 3) argues that 'social media provides a co-creational experience where community members help solve problems, share information and jointly construct narratives online.' This framework has been used in recent research and found that '[c]urrent online interactions imitate, rather than realise, relating' (Schoenmaker, 2017, p. 195). Relating is what NFPs should be trying to foster with their stakeholders via their strategic communication.

The following definitions, based on the work of Schoenmaker (2014), demonstrate how the researcher has interpreted these concepts. These definitions play a very important part in the analysis of this project:

- Conversing – when the organisation shares information with their target public.
- Sharing – When the dialogue is more two-way in nature and there is some input from followers. There are degrees to which information can be exchanged. Text, videos, images, links and new content are more likely to be shared.
- Connecting – When the target audience feels inclined to show their support for the organisation. This might be represented with a like or use of an emoticon to show that the content has resonated with the audience. It should be noted that connecting is not relating (2014, p. 1)
- Engaging – is a co-creational experience in which engagement and dialogue are linked. Online members help solve problems, share information and jointly construct narratives‖ which in turn helps build social capital (2014, p. 3). Engagement is participant focused, not focused on the organisation and will elicit a response from followers moving dialogue from a one-way to a two-way communication model.
- Relating – is when a relationship is forged that is authentic, transparent and which encourages followers to interact with the organisation. This interaction is meaningful.

Organisations must realise that contemporary relationships are multifaceted and include communication exchanges offline and online and that multiple stakeholders will contribute to them (Chia & Synnott, 2012, p. 8; Schoenmaker, 2014). As such dialogue will help build connections but it does not build relationships.

There are several elements that must be considered:

- Information relevance
- The number of interactions (Multiple interactions are ideal)
- User-friendliness
- Maintenance strategies to continue relationships (Schoenmaker, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Excellence Theory sees communication as a management activity that can improve relationships between an organisation and its stakeholders. It values the thoughts of stakeholders and aims to include their voice in decisions (Kenny, 2016). The authors of the theory themselves (Grunig & Grunig, 2011, p. 42), believe that relationships ideally are built on trust, commitment, a sense of loyalty. Being able to develop relationships is central to achieving excellence in communication. Social media has interactive potential so, organisations can try to "join the conversation" by being both senders and receivers in the communication process (Kenny, 2016, Coombs & Holladay, 2015, p. 692). The basic premise of the theory released in 1985 is still sound. Communication enables ideas to be exchanged and responses to be elicited. The fundamental building blocks of communication haven't changed. It is only the tool on which this is happening that has changed. The use of Excellence Theory and Schoenmaker's framework will be instrumental in answering this project's research question and its applicability.

Conclusion

Not-for-profits provide valuable services such as, but not limited to, health, sport, housing and parenting advice, to our community. Volunteers play an invaluable part in this and contribute countless hours and human resources, expertise and passion to the Australian community. Netnography can help 'explore the biggest social, political and economic issues of our time' as it is a highly specialised, qualitative research method (Rainie cited in Kozinets, 2020). It can help us understand what is helping not-for-profits engage with their key stakeholders via their social media. It can also help us understand what followers are reacting to positively. When social media, cultural and communication investigation is at the heart of your study, a contemporary research approach that allows the social affordances of digital communication to be explored, is a huge benefit. By using netnography to explore NFP engagement in the Australian context, this research will develop a framework that meets the needs of Australian NFPs in to produce something tangible real help for NFPs in language they can understand and works within the parameters they have at their disposal. In the vein of other well-known communication tools (Schoenmaker, 2013; Baker & Martinson, 2001; Coombs & Holladay, 2002), this research aims to build a framework or tool to work with that will help them potentially choose their platforms, select their narrative and structure their content to help them achieve their strategic results.

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[1] Approval for the study was provided by Western Sydney University, Human Research Ethics Committee number H15853. All participants were issued with written information about the study and opted in electronically prior to participating in the survey and interviews. They were assured of the voluntary nature of participation, that they could withdraw at any time, and that their insights/data would be treated confidentially and anonymously.