

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Bürger, Tobias (2015) Use of digital advocacy by German nonprofit foundations on Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 41 (4). pp. 523-525. ISSN 0363-8111

Published by: Elsevier

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.07.007>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.07.007>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/23608/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

www.northumbria.ac.uk/nrl



Use of digital advocacy by German nonprofit foundations on Facebook

Tobias Bürger

1. Introduction

Nonprofit foundations play an important role in modern civil society by supporting education, research, healthcare, or the arts and cultural institutions. The third sector has grown rapidly in Germany with 34% of German foundations founded within the past 10 years. In 2012, about 70% of the grant-making foundations and 44% of the operating foundations did not have a website, according to data provided by the Association of German Foundations. Moreover, out of 19,000 German foundations, only 495 had a profile on Facebook in November 2013. Little is known about how nonprofits and foundations use social media platforms in other countries than the United States. Pressgrove and Weberling McKeever explicitly note that in terms of research on digital communication, “foundations have been largely overlooked” (2015, p. 310) even though they provide support, training, and grants to nonprofits that use these resources to empower their stakeholders.

Research into the nonprofit sector has focused on how nonprofits use the web, how they use social media to engage the public into dialogue (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009), adopt social media within the organisation (Nah & Saxton, 2013), or raise money for a cause. However, due to a strong focus of research on NGOs in the United States, it has yet to be examined whether the strategies and patterns found can also be proven for nonprofit organisations in other countries. The aim of this project is to investigate how German foundations make use of social media and especially Facebook to engage with the public and advocate for their topics.

2. Methodology

This study sought to determine (RQ1) which social media channels are being used by German foundations and (RQ2) how they use Facebook to engage with the public. Building on those findings, it is of interest to look at (RQ3) the advocacy tactics used on Facebook. In addition, this study seeks to answer (RQ4) whether communication and advocacy frameworks established for Twitter can be applied to Facebook posts too.

The sample of foundations includes 52 educational organisations, 45 public/society benefit organisations, 25 human services organisations, 23 healthcare organisations, 17 arts and humanities organisations, 14 environmental organisations, 13 social sciences organisations, 9 religious organisations, 9 international affairs and developmental organisations, and 8 organisations concentrating on science and technology matters. Thus 215 of the 495 organisations that were on Facebook were active, in other words posted at least once within the analysis period. Foundations dedicated to education (24.2%), public and society benefits (20.9%), human services (11.6%), and health (10.7%) were the most prevalent. The posts were collected by using a Facebook list feed that included all German foundations on Facebook during the period from 18th to 24th November 2013, which resulted in 824 posts. The codebook included (1) the social media channels used, (2) functions of communication (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012), (3) advocacy tactics (Guo & Saxton, 2013), (4) organisational classification such as the type and the subject area of the foundation, and (5) general Facebook metrics (amount of shares, likes, comments, link, photo, video, event, hashtag).

3. Findings

3.1 Social media channels used by German foundations

Facebook is used by every foundation in the sample, while Twitter was used by 90 foundations (41.9%), YouTube by 41 (19.1%), and Google+ by at least 33 (15.3%) foundations. Foundations that are concerned with educational topics relied more on Facebook as the medium to get their message across ($n=52$), while foundations dealing with environmental topics tended to use Twitter (71.4% $n=10$) nearly as much as Facebook. A Spearman's ρ correlation was conducted and showed that the number of likes significantly correlates with the number of comments ($r=.563, p=.01$), shares ($r=.531, p=.01$), the use of photos ($r=.187, p=.01$) and links ($r=-.153, p=.01$). The number of fans was not distributed equally among the foundations. The five foundations that posted the most often held half of all fans (44,275), with the average number of fans being 5526.16 ($Mean, Median=918, sd=18923.43$). The average number of posts in the sample was approximately four ($Mean=3.8326, Median=3, sd=3.68$).

3.2 Strategies for engaging with stakeholders

Over half of the messages German foundations posted on Facebook can be summarised under "information" (52.9%, $n=436$), 26.82% ($n=221$) of the posts were classified under the "community" function, while only every fifth post included an "action" (20.27%, $n=167$). "Giving recognition and thanks" was not used very often (11.9%, $n=98$), probably because foundations provide grants rather than receive donations, unlike charities. Thus foundations made less use of "donation appeals" (1.3%, $n=11$). "Acknowledgements of current & local events" were most often used to build relationships with fans (11.9%, $n=98$). Also scoring 11.9%, "promoting an event" was most often used in combination with the "action" function of a post. Likes ($r=.563, p=.01$), shares ($r=.522, p=.01$), and photos ($r=.069, p=.05$) seemed to be a good predictor for comments to increase. In contrast, videos, links, or a hashtag did not have a significant impact. The opportunity to comment on a post was not used often. Of the

total of 824 posts, only 24 posts included a comment with 11 posts having one comment, seven posts two comments, and only six posts having more than two comments.

3.3 Digital advocacy tactics

Former research on nonprofits and digital advocacy emphasised that technology is about to revolutionise advocacy. Through social media, the opportunities to get in touch with stakeholders and decision-makers have multiplied. Most posts can be summarised under the “information” function, and “public education” ($n=180$) was found to be the advocacy tactic used most frequently. However, 319 (38.7%) posts did not make use of any advocacy tactic. While nonprofits and foundations both chose to primarily inform their stakeholders, foundations differed in so far as they used more “media advocacy” ($n=65$) and “research” ($n=19$) to advocate for their issues. It is also striking that the number of “public events & direct actions” is rather high ($n=97$), as foundations normally do not take part in activist actions that could explain the high amount of posts.

4. Discussion

The preference for a specific social network seems to depend on a foundation’s classification. Moreover, the results suggest that the subject matter of a foundation influences the adoption of a specific social media platform. Although foundations offer ways for interacting, those were seldomly picked up: fans rarely commented on posts—thereby making one-way communication the dominant paradigm. It was found that the type of foundation also influences the strategic use of advocacy tactics. Operating foundations were more active and striving to receive attention for their topics and events than grant-making foundations. Advocacy tactics were primarily used to inform and educate the public. Nevertheless, media advocacy seemed to be of great importance for foundations to ensure and sustain the influence of their expertise. As foundations can bring about policy change by using media to make public their recommendations, it seems sensible for them to increase media advocacy on social media. This

relativises a finding by Waters et al. who discovered that nonprofits “rarely posted multimedia files, press releases, or summaries of their campaigns” (2009, p. 105).

5. Conclusion

The study contributes to the knowledge of how German foundations use social media as a tool to engage with stakeholders and the public and which advocacy tactics they use to support their issues. The study confirms that frameworks developed for exploring communicative functions and advocacy tactics on Twitter are also applicable in the process of analysing Facebook. Future research should continue to examine how foundations make use of dialogic strategies and advocacy tactics in more countries to assess the impact of cultural values and organisational factors.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Association of German Foundations and especially Mr Timon Pohl and Mr Frank Schmidtke for their support.

The complete study can be requested from the author.

References

- Bortree, D. S., & Seltzer, T. (2009). Dialogic strategies and outcomes: An analysis of environmental advocacy groups' Facebook profiles. *Public Relations Review*, 35(3), 317–319. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2009.05.002
- Guo, C., & Saxton, G. D. (2013). Tweeting Social Change: How Social Media Are Changing Nonprofit Advocacy. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 43(1), 57–79. doi:10.1177/0899764012471585
- Lovejoy, K., & Saxton, G. D. (2012). Information, Community, and Action: How Nonprofit Organizations Use Social Media*. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3), 337–353. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01576.x
- Nah, S., & Saxton, G. D. (2013). Modeling the adoption and use of social media by nonprofit organizations. *New Media & Society*, 15(2), 294–313. doi:10.1177/1461444812452411
- Pressgrove, G., & Weberling McKeever, B. (2015). Foundations: Creating Social Change through Technological Innovation. In R. D. Waters (Ed.), *Public Relations in the Nonprofit Sector: Theory and Practice* (pp. 310–325). Routledge.
- Waters, R. D., Burnett, E., Lamm, A., & Lucas, J. (2009). Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How nonprofit organizations are using Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 35(2), 102–106. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2009.01.006