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Digital Storytelling as an Opportunity for Non-Profit Organizations: Implementing Storytelling on Social Media for Charity

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Abstract: This paper examines the use of digital storytelling by Austrian non-profit organizations (NPOs). Storytelling is an innovative communication tool that is particularly well suited to arouse emotions and build relationships. In today's stimulus-flooded society, stories communicate what really counts and consequently social media have created new platforms and forms of presentation for storytelling. The interactivity of social media allows users to be directly involved in such stories. For NPOs, digital storytelling is a promising tool to engage people in their work and mission in order to make the world a better place. A content analysis of four Austrian NPOs was chosen as the main research method followed by an expert panel discussion to elaborate on the findings. The results of the study show that storytelling already plays an important role in the digital communication of Austrian NPOs. Stories on Facebook and Instagram are primarily used to inform about the work of the organizations and to mobilize users to take action. Nonetheless, problematic situations and conflicts play a key role as main thematic areas. Often, the storyline involves a problem which is pointed out to the users, who are then asked to participate in solving the problem by means of a call-to-action. Storytelling is mainly used in public relations and advocacy work and not as much in direct fundraising by the NPOs. Since stories can trigger emotions and strengthen the image of organizations, it can be assumed that storytelling also has an indirect positive influence on the willingness to donate.

Keywords: digital storytelling, NPO, digital communication

1. Introduction

In today's world, digital communication is also of enormous relevance for non-profit organizations (NPOs). It is hard to think of the non-profit sector without a professional social media presence. However, there are still very large differences among NPOs. Certain NPOs are not yet fully exploiting the potential of social media (cf. Haus des Stiftens 2020: 55), while others have already professionalized their digital communication and online fundraising. In any case, it is important for NPOs to distinguish themselves both offline and online. This is because, as in many other industries, competition is growing in the non-profit sector and new organizations are constantly entering the market. In addition, more and more strongly marketing-oriented, international NPOs are also collecting donations in the German-speaking market (cf. Lichtsteiner/Purtschert 2014: 315). Each organization therefore tries to attract as many supporters and donations as possible.

For this study, we focused on NPOs in Austria. Altruja (2019) regularly conducts studies on online fundraising in the DACH region (comprising of Austria, Germany and Switzerland). The results come from data collected from over 1400 organizations. Current data from 2019 shows that the most significant online communication channels of the surveyed organizations are newsletters (84.10%), Facebook (78.52%) and YouTube (40.17%). These channels are followed by Instagram (with 34.97%, and rising rapidly) and Twitter (28.23%). These figures show that Facebook is still by far the most important social media platform for NPOs in German-speaking countries (see Altruja 2019). Despite these two positive developments, Austrian NPOs in general are not yet exploiting the potential of social media.

Generally speaking, the charity market in Austria is broad and competitive. Austrians donated about 700 million euros in 2019, and this is expected to increase steadily over the coming years ahead. (comparison to 2018: 675 million euros). Overall, just under two-thirds of the Austrian population make donations. The motives for donating are various, with the first and foremost being sympathy toward an organization. Secondly, Austrians state that they are affected by individual fates. The option of donating online is also becoming increasingly popular in Austria. A few years ago, the share of online donations in the German-speaking world was just one percent. According to the German "betterplace lab", about half of the

organizations surveyed now receive more than 10 percent of their donations online. Donation studies show that online donations will continue to grow in importance over the next few years. Donation platforms and social media are particularly attractive to new, younger target groups (see FVA 2019: 3-10).

First and foremost, social networks represent a communication channel for NPOs that can be used to disseminate content and messages in words, images, and videos on a continuous and up-to-date basis (cf. Urselmann 2018: 322). Social media is used to generate attention and arouse interest in an organization and its causes. The constant dialog with existing and potential supporters via social networks is also a good way to tie users to an organization. In addition, more and more ways to generate donations directly are emerging on social media, especially through Facebook, which in recent years has developed its own tools that allow users to donate directly via the social network. For example, NPOs can include a donation button on their Facebook Page, add donation buttons to posts, or launch fundraisers, known as "Facebook Fundraisers" to generate donations among followers. Users can also start a donation campaign for an NPO and collect donations among their friends. This is mainly done on birthdays as a "birthday fundraiser" and is specifically promoted by Facebook. Although social media has enormous potential for fundraising, this aspect has hardly been explored in the academic literature. One of the most recent and comprehensive works for non-profits in the German-speaking world Fundraising (2018) by Michael Urselmann devotes only 10 of about 600 pages to the topic of social media. How to successfully communicate and raise funds as an NPO via social media is mainly addressed on online blogs.

NPOs face the challenge, both online and offline, of differentiating themselves from other organizations and standing out from the competition. So how can users be emotionally stimulated to support the organization's cause? Most relevant for this research is the question of the role of storytelling in this process. This is because, particularly from the perspective of NPOs, feelings and individual stories are actually more important than hard facts. In their daily work, NPOs experience both success stories and tragedies, that stand between joy and grief. In many cases, NPOs are working very close with people, which is why they are in an excellent position to tell stories. For NPOs, storytelling can be a powerful communication technique, because stories bring messages nearer to the people. Especially in today's society, where there is an overabundance of stimuli, information and data exchange, stories provide what really matters and plays an important role (cf. Clark 2008: 51f.).

In order to be able to examine the use of digital storytelling in non-profit communication, a general understanding of storytelling in communication is necessary. Storytelling seems to be as old as language itself. For thousands of years, people have been telling each other what they have experienced as stories. Stories exist in all societies, in all places, at all times, and in infinite forms (cf. Herbst 2014: 12). Storytelling is based on the process of telling different narratives (cf. Hilzensauer 2014: 87). A closer look at the term reveals that there is no uniform definition of storytelling in the academic literature. Hillmann (2011: 63f.), for example, defines storytelling from a communications perspective as "a method that systematically planned and designed for the long term conveys facts about a company in the form of authentic, emotional stories that remain in the lasting positive memory of important internal and external target groups." Frenzel at al. (2006) come to a similar definition. They describe storytelling as the deliberate, targeted, and skillful use of stories to make essential content easier to understand. In doing so, ideas are to be spread and the thinking and learning of the listeners are to be supported long-term. Storytelling promotes mental participation and thus adds a new quality to communication (cf. Frenzel et al. 2006: 3). Ettl-Huber (2014) points out that so far the literature on storytelling in organizational communication does not distinguish between storytelling and story and lacks the strategic component. Stories may occur sporadically in organizational communication, but storytelling is only fulfilled if a strategic element is present. The factors of staging, target group orientation and purposefulness play a key role here. Ettl-Huber therefore speaks of storytelling as a conscious, strategic use of storytelling to achieve goals (cf. Ettl-Huber 2014: 18). In any case, stories are the prerequisite for storytelling.

2. The Research / Research Question

The communication of non-profit organizations and their specific goals, through social media channels, in terms of goal-oriented storytelling to deliver specific messages results in the following research questions.
- How do Austrian non-profits use storytelling on their social media channels?

The following sub-questions were formulated to complement the research:
- What formats are most commonly used to tell stories?
- What content/topics are communicated via storytelling?
- For what purpose do Austrian NPOs use digital storytelling?

3. Methods

A hybrid model consisting of a content analysis and a qualitative method in the form of a focus group with experts was chosen. The Facebook and Instagram pages of four Austrian NPOs (Greenpeace Austria, VGT Austria (Association against Animal Factories), Global 2000 Austria and WWF Austria. The selected organizations have had professional social media presences for several years and a comparatively high number of followers. The focus of the analysis was on the presence of specified characteristics in terms of form and content. In the context of the analysis, formal characteristics such as publication date and format were recorded on the one hand. On the other hand, content characteristics such as topic and purpose of the postings have been analysed. The period covered for the analyses was in the 3rd quarter of 2019. The authors intentionally chose a period before the covid-19 crisis.

The focus group consisted of the following experts:

Table 1: Experts

Person ID	Gender	Background
P1	female	Teamlead Online Marketing (NPO)
P2	female	CEO of communication agency, consultant for NPOs
P3	female	Creative Director at a communication agency, several projects with NPOs
P4	female	Content Manager and Storytelling expert
P5	male	Director of a media agency, responsible for content strategy
P6	male	Consultant for online marketing and digital strategy

4. Findings

In a first step, the authors compared the number of followers of the organizations being examined (Greenpeace Austria, VGT Austria, Global 2000 Austria and WWF Austria) on Instagram as well as Facebook with the fundraising volume. The result is quite clear: there is no correlation between the number of followers on social media and the generated fundraising volume.

With regard to the results of the structured content analysis, a total of 580 posts from the selected NPOs were analysed as part of the analysis, of which 182 (31.38%) were posted on Instagram and 398 (68.62%) on Facebook. Of the total 580 postings analysed, 136 (23.45%) were from Greenpeace Austria, 178 (30.69%) from VGT Austria, 163 (28.10%) from Global 2000 and 103 (17.76%) from WWF Austria.

In order to develop an overview of the use of storytelling, the authors first examined whether the postings contained story elements. A post was identified as a storytelling post if it had the element of a plot. In total, 137 of the 580 posts analysed could be recorded as storytelling posts. This represents 23.62%, or just under a quarter of the posts. These 137 storytelling postings are subsequently examined for their formal and content characteristics.

A breakdown of the four analysed NPOs reveals that their shares of storytelling postings are fairly evenly distributed. Global 2000 uses storytelling least frequently in its social media communication (21% of all postings) and Greenpeace Austria most frequently (28% of all postings), although Global 2000 published more postings overall than Greenpeace Austria in the period studied. WWF Austria published comparatively few postings overall, but a fairly high proportion of storytelling postings (25%). The share of postings that were marked as a story by VGT is 24%.

On Instagram, 61 of the 182 posts analysed could be identified as storytelling posts. This corresponds to 33.52% or about one third of the posts. On Facebook, in comparison, 76 of the 398 posts analysed could be identified as storytelling posts, which corresponds to 19.10% of all posts in the period studied. It can be concluded from this that Instagram is the social media platform on which the analysed NPOs use storytelling more frequently. This is certainly due to the format and purpose of the Instagram platform and its focus on stories.

The authors then analysed the formats of storytelling postings. A total of three forms of presentation were identified:

- Postings with photo and text (64,23 %)
- Postings with video and text (27,01 %)
- Link postings with text (8,76 %)

During the period studied, there were no text-only postings or postings that contained only photos or only a video without accompanying text. GIFs (or Graphics Interchange Format) were also not used for storytelling by the NPOs studied. Two dominant forms of presentation were clearly evident: Posts consisting of a photo and text and posts including video and text. On Facebook, link posts with text could also be identified as a form of storytelling posts. In the case of link postings and postings with photos, the stories were told in the accompanying text. On Instagram 55 posts (90,16%) were published as photos with text and only six posts (9,84%) as videos with text. On Facebook, the division of formats looks somewhat different. Here, almost the same number of posts were published as photos with text (33 posts or 43.42%) and video with text (31 posts or 40.79%). In addition, there are twelve link posts (15.79%) with storytelling elements within the posting text. It should be noted here that link posts are not possible on Instagram.

A clear topic was evident in all of the postings examined. All postings had a clear underlying message, which was mostly related to the work and activities of the NPOs. The most common topics were the climate crisis and its effects, environmental pollution (e.g. plastic waste in the oceans), deforestation and fires in the Amazon, endangered species and species extinction, and the protection of biodiversity. To be able to examine the purpose of storytelling postings, Lovejoy and Saxton's (2012) study was used as a guideline. Here, the postings studied by Lovejoy and Saxton were divided into three categories, Information, Community, and Action. We also used these categories to analyse the storytelling postings.

The results show that the most important role played by the NPOs studied is the mobilization of users - more than half of the posts analysed - 69 posts or 50.36% - can be assigned to the action category. This means that the purpose is to get users to take an action such as donating, signing a petition, supporting a campaign, participating in an event, or sharing the post. For almost an equal number of posts (62 or 45.26%), the main purpose is to inform users about the NPO's work, activities, and events. These posts either do not contain a direct call-to-action or an informative call-to-action such as visiting the website for more information. Only six posts or 4.38% can be categorized as community. Their purpose is to maintain a relationship with the community or engage in dialogue with users. For the postings identified in this category, users were mostly asked a question to answer in the comments. However, it should also be noted that there are differences in the prioritization of different categories among the NPOs analysed.

During the discussion with the expert group, the experts were briefly presented the result of the content analysis, which showed that the postings were mostly informative or mobilizing and only rarely had dialog as their main purpose. The fact that the information role plays an important role is plausible for the experts because NPOs pursue different goals than profit-oriented companies. "I wouldn't see dialogue as being so useful in the case of NPOs, because the goal is different. In the case of smaller NPOs, it's often a matter of really presenting what they do, of going into depth and explaining it. I don't think it would make sense to comment a lot on that. It's more about making that known." (E3)

E3 also believes that NPOs focus more on content than on interactivity. Since the environment of NPOs is often very complex, E2 often sees a need for explanation here: "I think many NPOs still have quite a need for explanation or believe or it is probably also the case that it is more than a product that you simply buy. It's just all very complex all around. Why is there a problem, why do we have to solve this, what do you have to do now. I think maybe that's why it's not very interactive, it's more focused on the content." (E2)

E1 identified the organizations' scarce resources as one of the reasons why the storytelling postings of the NPOs studied were less focused on engaging in dialogue with users. Because NPOs often deal with serious, in-depth topics, time and human resources would be needed to engage in an intensive dialogue with users. "I think one reason why few postings are dialogue-oriented could also be because community management is not necessarily that great at all NPOs. There aren't that many NPOs that now somehow have their own community management areas that take care of that. And from that point of view, yes, you also try to save resources, you will rather do without some comments, I say now." (E1)

E5 also believes that lack of resources is the reason why NPOs rely less on the dialogue function. The questions NPOs would ask their followers would be much more in-depth than for-profit companies that want to sell products. "For that, you would just need really good PR/crisis/community management. And that's where I think the resources are just lacking at a lot of NPOs." (E5)

Furthermore, according to E5, media usage behaviour has changed. Younger users in particular are not as willing to give their opinions, interact (especially with branded content), or post their own content these days. This has shifted more to WhatsApp groups or Facebook Messenger groups. It has therefore become increasingly difficult to generate engagement on Facebook in recent years: "It's not so easy to start a dialog or generate engagement if it's now more than a 'Like'. So if I want to ask for an opinion now, in the comments or something similar, I also think that's becoming more and more difficult". (E6) This is also related to the Facebook algorithm and how posts are displayed: "Facebook posts that are optimized for engagement are seen as increasingly difficult, for example, because you know that Facebook always displays to the same people who are known to interact. So you're always fishing in the same pond." (E5)

For E2, another reason why direct dialogue is not in the foreground in the postings could also be that interaction has shifted. Discussions today do not take place as often in public with a large number of users under posts on Facebook, but more privately, for example via stories on Instagram, to which users can respond directly. There are interaction elements there that make it easier to engage in a dialogue with individual users. "I think it's also shifting a bit now that the interaction part doesn't necessarily happen now on a Facebook post or something, but rather, for example, is deliberately linked in the Instagram Stories or something like that. Where the tools are there for that, [...] where there are other interaction elements that make it easier and where you don't get into a huge discussion with hundreds of thousands, but where you can answer privately and still have an interaction."

5. Conclusion and Future Research

During the period studied, stories were told via three formats: As photos with text, videos with text, and link posts with text, with the latter being used least often. In the case of photos and link postings, the stories were told in the accompanying text, and the images were supportive. Stories are by nature pictorial and vivid, and are therefore better remembered.

According to theoretical findings, the plot of a story is most activating when it involves a conflict. The plot ends with the resolution of the conflict, which consists of options that can be taken. The content analysis concluded that the NPOs analysed frequently use conflict as the central event of the story in their storytelling postings. Since the analysed NPOs are active in the field of environmental protection and animal welfare, the conflicts were mostly in this topic area. As a call-to-action, a proposed solution, such as signing a petition, is subsequently offered. In this way, users can become part of the conflict resolution process.

This empirical study shows that Austrian NPOs have already recognized the potential of digital storytelling. They use the visual forms of representation on Facebook and Instagram to tell their stories. In doing so, they pursue the purpose of informing about their work and mobilizing users to take action. Conflicts are used as a central element to tell users about a problem. The user is then encouraged to participate in the conflict resolution process through a call-to-action.. This approach is particularly suitable for the analysed NPOs from the field of environmental protection and animal welfare, because for them the mobilization of users plays a central role. Through petitions or e-mail campaigns, companies or politicians are called upon to change their behaviour. Social media platforms are particularly suitable for NPOs to reach a broad audience, because digital communication is fast and saves resources. However, it also comes with risks, as control over messages is reduced. In addition, a certain amount of know-how is necessary to use social media successfully.

For future research, the issue of trust in a digital world can play a major role as well. Who is the author of the posting? Where does the original information come from? What happens to the donated money, or the signed petition? The authors would like to further investigate these themes in the near future, especially in relation to the technological solutions such as digital identities and signatures. In addition, blockchain technologies can be used to verify the sources of information and to record how the funds are used in a tamper-proof manner. In this regard, the authors would like to take a look, for example, at the platform https://givesafely.io/, which is implemented on the public blockchain Ardor. And how such new platforms and technologies can be linked to

the communication through social media. The betterplace lab mentioned earlier in the paper, has also developed a pre-screening of charities with the "Web of Trust", which seems interesting for further research in the direction of social media, online donations and trust. In any case, researching the area of NPO and communication is a very exciting field of research that still requires substantial and independent research.

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