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# **Non-profit organisations and stakeholder relationships: Assessing digital communication through public relations theory**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Communication

in

Public Relations

at Massey University, Wellington

New Zealand

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February 2017

## ABSTRACT

This research examines New Zealand non-profit organisations' (NPOs) use of digital communication channels to assess if digital channels are being used effectively for stakeholder engagement.

Qualitative interviews with 20 communication practitioners examined whether/how the NPOs are using multiple digital channels and identified the five most popular digital channels. The interview data was analysed using *HyperRESEARCH* and the five most popular channels identified overall were websites, e-newsletters, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Although the participating NPOs are all using multiple digital channels, the communication practitioners could not confidently say the channels achieve the organisation's goals, or assist with stakeholder engagement and participation. To help assess if the channels are being used strategically and are achieving the organisations' purposes, a quantitative content analysis of the most popular digital channels of five NPOs was undertaken. The channels' content was also assessed to identify if the communication practitioners are using public relations theories for dialogic communication, relationship management and stakeholder engagement.

Results of the interviews and the content analysis reveal that NPOs are not using their channels strategically, and are not always achieving their desired purpose. The communication approach by the NPOs is scattershot and ad hoc, and evaluation of the communication is limited. To assist NPOs to improve their use of digital channels to build effective stakeholder relationships, recommendations include using public relations theories, building a digital communication strategy, making differentiated use of individual channels – rather than using a one-size-fits all approach – and ensuring evaluation of the digital communication to maintain best practice. This should provide NPOs with evidence of improved stakeholder engagement and relationships.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr F. Elizabeth Gray at Massey University for her patience, encouragement and guidance through my research journey. I would also like to thank Dr Kane Hopkins for his support as my PR mentor throughout my Bachelor of Communication and Masters study. If not for that first PR paper, which inspired me to change my major, I do not think I would be where I am now. I consider myself blessed to have met Elizabeth and Kane along my education journey and I value the friendship that has developed during the past few years. You have both inspired me to always do more and do better.

I also extend my thanks to the New Zealand non-profit organisations that agreed to participate in this research, and the communication practitioners for sharing their knowledge of their digital channel use with me. The work that NPOs do is remarkable, and I hope my research will assist the non-profit sector to build stronger relationships with its stakeholders through the digital communication channels explored through this research.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the truly special people in my life, who have supported me during my years of study, research and writing. It has not been easy! If I can share anything, it is that the challenges that I have experienced have made me stronger, and taught me to value that which I can strive to achieve, with the faith and knowledge that I have people in my life who support me without question.

To my children - Josh and Olivia, my Mum, my immediate family, and my closest friends; you have endured every paper alongside me, and you have encouraged me to keep moving forward when I have felt ready to throw it all away. I could not have achieved my personal goal of completing my Master's degree without your support and I thank you all.

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