

Apresentação de Comunicação

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Nonprofits and their communication professionals – their role in today's world

Introduction and purpose of the study and research question

This paper addresses the questions, perplexities and results of an ongoing project that involves mixed methods analysis and that has as its main purpose to understand the role of the communication professionals in the non for profit organisations in Portugal. The specific research questions that this paper addresses may be summarised as an interrogation about the role that the communication professionals are called to fulfill in these institutions. Do the communication professionals have technical, tactical and strategic responsibilities in the portuguese non for profit organisations?

Two main groups of non for profit organisations have been studied: the NGO for development (173) and the sportive federations (56). Other groups will be studied in a near future but these two groups were chosen for quite different, even though, complementary, purposes. The first group represents what people think about when asked about non-profits, the second is usually never considered in this kind of studies but is understood as representing a new and important market for communication professionals.

Methodology

From the perspective of the research design this approach is included in the framework of what is generally designated as a mixed methodology of sequential explanation. (cf. Creswell, 2014). In a first moment quantitative methods were used to recollect information concerning descriptive aspects of the organisations

and afterwards, and in order to get a deeper understanding of these organisations researchers moved to a qualitative approach. To recollect the data 80 interviews were conducted during a year. An interview guide was used in order to ensure that the basic lines of inquiry as well as the main topics were pursued with each person interviewed; the communications professional or whoever fulfilled that function at each one of the organisations. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and the material reduced. Afterwards the text was analysed (qualitative content analysis with recourse to NVIVO software) and the interpretations were conducted by the entire team in order to reduce biases due to personal judgements.

Results and conclusions

Doing the interviewing process main topics were addressed concerning the different kind of functions communication professionals are called to perform organised in 3 major groups that we have thought as the three common levels of professional performance: instrumental, tactical and strategic. In regard to the instrumental level the main issues concerned the existence of certain kind of instruments as leaflets, or actions that were asked to be fulfilled at the spontaneity of the moment. The tactical level in a certain sense presupposed the existence of a professional at the institution that had some kind of expertise and the capacity to develop a more complex and integrated approach in the communication field as planning a campaign or by positioning the organisation or the sports field. Under the umbrella concept of strategic responsibilities we've considered aspects as the definition of the communication priorities in a strategic and planned way, the management of the institution's reputation or the capacity to determine the style and the tone throughout the organisations. Questions as the existence of a media relations plan or a risk and crisis communication plan were also addressed. Under the idea of a more operational approach we've considered aspects that have to do with events and actions that are dealt in a merely responsive or casuistical way. The study highlights the lack of a consistent work in the communication area as well as the total absence of any kind of strategic thinking. Communication functions are understood as mere discursive ones and in many cases just as a way to improve the writing or the presentation of some kind of leaflet or report. We seem to be far apart from what seems to be a more optimistic view as expressed, by for instances the *European Communication Monitor* (cf. Tench et al., 2017)) concerning the role of the communication professionals in our contemporaneity.

Practical and social implications

Due to the challenges of the new era, a globalised world with more and more asymmetries and where the concepts of "space" and "time" have new definitions, the social economy has suffered an enormous development and an important role both at a political and a social level. In a world where the notion of "precariat", to use the expression of Guy Standing (cf. Standing, 2011, 2013) to understand the nonprofits and the role of their communication professionals became a relevant endeavour.

Key words: Non-profits; communication professionals; mixed methods approach