

INTRODUCING NONPROFIT COMMUNICATION AND MAPPING THE RESEARCH FIELD

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In the famous book *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert D. Putnam explained the disintegration of civic tradition in modern society because of a diminishing sense of community. He observed that despite technological developments – or because of them – people have fewer interpersonal relationships, which renders collaboration difficult to establish and maintain. As people have become isolated, they do not participate in clubs and associations, but instead, they bowl alone. The declining informal collaboration corresponds to less civic engagement, political equity, solidarity, trust, and tolerance as well as associational life (Putnam, 2000).

The NGO-ization of society (Lang, 2013), visible in the increasing number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) at the national and transnational level, tend to somewhat contradict Putnam's thesis. On the other hand, the number of NGOs is not per se revealing of the quality of citizen participation in those organizations. In the course of history, NGOs have been involved in different issues, namely humanitarianism, environment, gender equality, human rights, and peace (Davies, 2019). NGOs are growing faster than any other type of organization in the world, and their economy represents from 7 to 12 percent of the total workforce in some regions. The estimated number of NGOs in the world is 10 million, with India and the United States the countries with the largest numbers (Ferguson, 2018). The Yearbook of International Organizations estimates that there are more than 30,000 NGOs worldwide.¹ According to the Urban Institute report in 2019, the number of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) formally registered rose up to 1.54 million in 2016 just in the USA alone. These comprise a diverse range of sectors, including art, health, education, and advocacy; labor unions; and business and professional associations.² Furthermore, we can also consider foundations, aid organizations, charities, and social economy actors, like mutual and cooperatives as nonprofits – the aggregator of the typology is in fact the nonprofit-driven distinction. However, it might be useful to pursue a differentiation between civil society organizations that search for the common good and other organizations with private interests, even if they strive for the benefit of the collective.

The terms NGOS and nonprofit can be applied to the same organizational forms – some authors tend to consider the former as a type of nonprofit. Interestingly enough, in the diversity of approaches, and even definitions of this object, there is a common use of the excluding element to classify it: nongovernmental and nonprofit. This implies they are not part of the market, nor of government entities. Or, at least, they shouldn't be – NGOs that are state-controlled or that serve hidden interests, or that even defend causes that oppose human rights or democracy, should not be framed as such. How can we consider a radical group with ideologies like the Ku Klux Klan to be a

nonprofit within the common understanding of it? Still, when we applied the criteria proposed by Salamon et al. (1999, p. 3), they would be considered as such. This might be the hardest angle on the way of having a consensual definition without charging the term with normative dimensions and certain values a priori. Or, we can assume the politically charged definition, especially for NGOs, as proposed before by some authors (Alvarez, 1999; Alvim & Teodósio, 2004; Aristizábel et al., 1997; Landim, 2002; Menescal, 1996; Oliveira, 2019). These authors refer to democratic values and human rights principles as a precondition for those specific organizational forms, including even internal democratic governance dynamics. The reflection is open, and we hope the discussion will go on along this book and with further research.

Some approaches, either in theory or in practice, do treat nonprofits similarly to profit organizations in a marketplace. Initially, criticisms were raised in the first research with impact on the marketization (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004), concluding that this management approach outcome “is the potential deterioration of the distinctive contributions that nonprofit organizations make to creating and maintaining a strong civil society” (p. 138). In 2020, a case study of two NPOs revealed that one was adopting a strong entrepreneurial orientation, while the other integrated the traditional community orientation with more professionalization, confirming to partial marketization tendencies (Sandberg et al., 2020). Also, historically, the need for raising funds has been left in the hands of marketing agencies, due to the fact that activists and other volunteers were not succeeding or wanting to engage in such activities (Oliveira, 2017). That created a significant gap between the communication on advocacy and the scope of operations – with the communication within the fundraising campaigns being run by the same organization. That imprint can still be felt nowadays (Oliveira, 2017).

It is not our aim in this handbook to be prescriptive or normative, but rather to mirror the diversity that exists in nonprofit communication research and to include visions from distinct academic traditions. Nonprofit communication is a field situated at the crossroads of communication, management, marketing, organizational, and public relations studies. Furthermore, without sociological, economic, political, and other social sciences contributions, the study of communication within a nonprofit setting could be reduced to a very closed vision of these entities and of their communicative processes and dynamics.

Introducing the field

What is involved in the field of the nonprofit sector, also known as the civil society sector? Civil society has been defined as the “space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks – formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology – that fill this space” (Walzer, 1995, p. 7). The concept of civil society requires the precondition of the existence of public and organizational life beyond the state’s administration, allowing the voluntary sector to act and intervene in the public sphere.

Deeply intertwined within civil society, NGOs provide “a practical response to problems where both the corporate, thus profit centered, and the institutional structures are absent or have failed” (Oliveira et al., 2016, p. 6). They can be considered to form a subset of the larger category of NPOs, as the latter can include a wider range of organizations such as museums, schools, or universities. One main difference between NGOs and other NPOs is the significant dedication of the former to the advocacy of public interest issues (Tkalac & Pavicic, 2009).

On the other hand, NPOs are the fabric of civil society – they can have different sizes and scopes, but all “serve some public purpose and contribute to the public good” (Salamon, 1999, pp. 10–11). To systemize the heterogeneous nature of nonprofits that operate in different countries, Salamon et al. (1999, p. 3) developed a “structural-operational definition” that includes five criteria that these organizations must share: (i) organized – institutional presence and internal structure; (ii) private – institutionally separate from government; (iii) self-governing – independent from external

government or corporate influences; (iv) nonprofit-distributing – do not return profits to managers or owners; and (v) voluntary – this criteria implies that participation/membership is not compulsory, but a matter of choice.

The nonprofit sector has been strongly scrutinized in the management literature. According to Maier et al. (2016), NPOs have experienced notable changes from the 1980s onwards, rendering them more similar to profit-marketing firms. Whether or not NPOs should be more “business-like” is indeed a strong area of discussion (Dart, 2004). Often in this context, communication is approached as one more variable in the marketing mix, mainly seen as instrumental to message transmission and information sharing, contributing to the economic sustainability of the organization by securing volunteers, donors, resources, or funds. However, as NPO communication operates in a multilayered and organizationally diverse environment, it requires “looking at communication as more than a tool to achieve effectiveness” (Koschmann, 2015, p. 215).

NPO communication involves considerable complexity in terms of goals, audiences, and resources when compared to the business sector. In relation to goal setting, NPOs often have to juggle what appear to be conflicting objectives set by management needs. Communication goals related to transparency, for instance, have been considered problematic by scholars that look to NPO needs of balancing audiences’ skepticism (Dethier et al., 2021). In regard to the public, nonprofit communication operates on a multilayered level, considering a diverse group of stakeholders, including donors, volunteers, minority groups, activist groups, regulatory bodies, other NPOs, and the like. At the operational level, the lack of human and material resources can have consequences on the daily life of these organizations. But it is at the social level that NPOs’ legitimacy is strongly dependent on their communicative efforts to maintain high ethical standards as “servants of society” (Jeavons, 2016).

Exploring the field

When searching for journal names related to the nonprofit sector, five journals stand out – *VOLUNTAS*, *The Journal of Nonprofit and Public Sector Marketing*, *Nonprofit Management and Leadership Journal*, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, and *The International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*. None of these journals, however, is categorized in the Web of Science (WOS) communication database category, but rather in the business category. Does this mean that research on nonprofit communication is not relevant to scholars within the field of communication? Clearly not. It means instead that nonprofit research, as an interdisciplinary field, has been addressed from diverse theoretical traditions, mainly business and organizational studies but also public relations and communication management.

Research in nonprofits can be considered an interdisciplinary field that had sociology, history, and political science as its main contributions (Hall, 1999). An analysis of knowledge production noticed an intensive advance since the 1980s, but the study of volunteering is the only core theme that could be identified (Ma & Konrath, 2018). The same analysis pointed to the main subjects and thematic clusters on network analysis, and none of them were focused on communication. Another study, which analyzed over 3,000 dissertations and 390 articles in nonprofit journals, has no mention of communication in any of the topics, despite the use of the stakeholder’s theory to study NPOs, but rather within a management perspective that is not specifically communicative (Schubert et al., 2022).

Notwithstanding, over the past decade, there has been a growing interest in studying communications in the context of the nonprofit sector. A WOS search with the keywords “communication” and “nonprofit” (and similar terms³) in the specialized nonprofit communication literature shows a 50 percent increase in published articles, with 28 in 2012 and 56 in 2020.⁴ In this period, the top five journals publishing research on nonprofit communication were the following: (i) *Public Relations*

Review, (ii) *Voluntas*, (iii) *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, (iv) *International Journal of Communication Sustainability*, and (v) *Management Communication Quarterly*.⁵

Nevertheless, and according to Koschmann et al. (2015), despite the importance of communication to the nonprofit sector, communication theory has had relatively little impact on the interdisciplinary field of nonprofit studies. A decade before, Lewis's (2005) article on the civil society sector corroborated this idea by "forwarding the claim that organizational communication scholars have not paid significant theoretical attention to nonprofit organizations" (p. 241). This means that research in this field has most often left unexamined and untested theories relating to the specific unique features of NPOs, namely social capital; mission, effectiveness, and accountability; governance and decision making; and volunteer relationships (Lewis, 2005).

In spite of that, applied research contemplates the study of an organization–public relationship, mainly in the literature on nonprofit public relations (PR) (Waters, 2015). The effective management and cultivation of complex relationships with specific stakeholders is at the core of nonprofit mission organizations. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the most spread areas of theory-based research in nonprofit PR has been the donor–organization relationship (Sisson, 2017; Wiggill, 2014) or the organization–volunteer relationship (Bortree & Waters, 2014; Hyde et al., 2016).

Another important theme in organization–public relationships research has been the role of technology in general, and social media in particular, in engaging different audiences (Auger, 2015; Cho et al., 2014; Saxton & Waters, 2014; Xu & Saxton, 2019). The public relations dialogic theory has also been instrumental to research how charitable foundations use social media to build relationships with publics (e.g. Qu, 2020). Additionally, the diversity in fundraising roles (Waters et al., 2012; Tindall et al., 2014) and the response of NPOs to the crises that affect their reputation and relationships with key stakeholders, based on situational crisis communication theory (e.g. Sisco, 2012; Janssen et al., 2021), can be found in the literature.

Single communication issues have also been researched, including areas like trust (e.g. Gaskin, 1999; Lee et al., 2012; Sargeant & Lee, 2002; Viertmann, 2016), reputation (e.g. Liao, 1999; Sarstedt & Schloderer, 2010; Zatepilina-Monacell, 2012), social media (e.g. Buckholz, 1972; Bull & Schmitz, 1976; Callow, 2004; Dailey, 1986; Einolf & Chambré, 2011; Rodriguez, 2016; Naudé et al., 2004), branding (e.g. Abreu, 2006; Dixon, 1997; Grounds & Harkness, 1998; Hankinson, 2000; Hankinson & Rochester, 2005; Liu et al., 2014; Stride & Lee, 2007), internal communication (e.g. Liu et al., 2015; Hume & Leonard, 2014), identity (e.g. Holtzhausen, 2014), engagement and civil engagement (e.g. Jones, 2006; Shiau, 2011; Wollebæk & Strømsnes, 2008), crisis (e.g. Dixon, 1997; Frangonikolopoulos & Poulakidakos, 2015), evaluation of communication (e.g. O'Neil, 2013), media relations (e.g. Thrall et al., 2014; Powers, 2014), and volunteer communication (e.g. Hess, 2015).

Besides the issues mentioned earlier, case studies have also been carried out, including the challenges facing NGOs that work in human rights in post-Soviet states (Tsetsura, 2013); relationship building and the use of the internet for PR and advocacy in Chinese NGOs (Yang & Taylor, 2010); the study of Lynas public sentiment in Malaysia on an activist campaign (Kaur, 2015); a model for NGO media diplomacy in the internet age based on a case study of Washington Profile (Zhang & Swartz, 2009); a comparative study of NPOs' websites in Germany and Switzerland as dialogic tools (Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2010); the difference between reputation and trustworthiness in NPOs' online campaigns (Wiencierz et al., 2015); and the application of "evidence" in NGO strategic communication on war and armed conflict (Fröhlich & Jungblut, 2017). Other research proposals include a semiotic analysis of environmental NGOs' online campaigns from a business communication perspective (Catellani, 2011).

This proposed exploration of the field can serve to gather some impressions of the journal publications but has two main drawbacks. First, as an interdisciplinary area with literature

coming from humanities and communication, research is typically published in a book, as already noticed by other studies (e.g. Ma & Konrath, 2018). One reason can be the format of the theoretical proposals; another the publication processes and available journals. Then, there is research published in other languages and regions that is not mirrored in WOS journals. A systematic review of NGO performance research published between 1996 and 2008 concluded that despite the large body of NGO publications and 14,469 citations identified, most of it is in gray literature and only a small number in peer-reviewed journals (Kareithi & Lund, 2012). This can be also due to the bias towards publishing only positive results for fear of losing funding or even the difficulties of performing studies in low-resourced NGO settings (Kareithi & Lund, 2012, p. 5).

Consequently, without aiming for an extensive and systematic review, we would like to mention some work that has been published on nonprofit and NGO communication in single issues, books, or chapters and in other languages or regions in order to connect dots that can add up to lines in the field map.

Recently, we can register two main works that go beyond the functionalist approach to NGO and nonprofit communication from an organizational perspective. One is *the Instigatory Theory of NGO Communication, or ITNC* (Oliveira, 2017, 2019) and the other is the book *Understanding Nonprofit Work: A Communication Perspective* (Koschmann & Sandres, 2020). Furthermore, a proposal by Jane Johnston relates public interest communication with civil society from a macro approach to PR (Johnston, 2016). Moreover, Franzisca Weder (2021) proposes reframing dissent in strategic communication with a critical perspective.

Regarding theoretical insights from other languages and countries on NPO communication, Thierry Libaert, in the French-speaking academia, has looked into distinctive elements of communication at associations, pointing to the singularity of the relationship with the publics in different conditions and concludes that “the supporter will never be a shareholder. The cause will never be a product. The recipient will never be a customer. Volunteers will never be employers” (Libaert & Pierlot, 2009, p. 6), mirroring the complexity of those relationships and the implications for communication, especially the one of transparency to promote trust and legitimation. Among German-speaking scholars, Thomas Pleil made a list of the challenges of NGO communication, highlighting its central role, as well as the fact that communication can be well-established and the central organizational goal (2005); Günter Bentele, Thobias Libert, and Michael Vogt (2001) described the *bottom-up* communication dynamic as “PR from under” and presented case studies from German civil society organizations and movements.

In South American academic literature, Sylvia Meneghetti has proposed that communication can be considered a management approach for NPOs and describes nine dimensions: organizational, institutional, humanizing, cultural, fundraising, membership capturing, accountability, lobbying, and political (9) (Meneghetti, 2001, p. 27).

Katrin Voss (2007) has researched the excellence theory by James Grunig at German and US environmental NGOs, concluding that this PR theory is only partially applicable. Voss recommends doing further research on a combined PR and NGO approach, looking at the different communicative working fields, which she identifies as PR, media relations, lobbying, and fundraising. Additionally, she discusses the issue of the participation and civil society function that is expected from NGOs (p. 291). Along the same lines, other studies have researched Steyn and Puth’s normative model, which combines excellence and relationship management theories in South African NPOs (Wiggill, 2011). The model heavily focuses on communication strategy development by the communication strategist, and the research compared the original proposal with the practices of five NPOs. It was concluded that due to constraints like, for example, the nonexistence of a person dedicated to communication, a simplified model could be applied, focusing on skills training rather than on the role of the professional.

Defining NPO communication

Despite being a fruitful area of study, research based on stakeholder relationships presents a narrow managerial and functionalist perspective on communication (Koschmann et al., 2015; Koschmann, 2012), underestimating the importance of a more holistic view of NPO communication.

Framing NPO communication can be relevant to reaching a working definition. First, the context indicates that interactions between civil society organizations in postmodern environments become less physical and more symbolic toward “strategy, communication and consensus” (Pérez, 2001, p. 536). That is even more expressive when considering virtualization in online interaction. This ongoing sense-making process (Weick, 1995) from the individuals in a scaling-up⁶ contributes to the ongoing constitution of the organizations in a nondirectly managed communication, but also as a conversation in the public sphere. Therefore, we can set the main communication pillars in nonprofits as the constitutive role of communication at the macro and meso levels in the interplay of modern times (Oliveira, 2017) – it comprehends the macro societal-level approach to communicative action and social change in a constitutive way and the constitutive role of communication in creating the organization. It also includes the strategic role of communication at the macro level, considering the nonprofit discourse and conversations in the public sphere. At the meso level, there is the managed communication from an organizational center perspective; and lastly, the legitimation dynamics from inside-out, setting also the primary locus of the communicative legitimation from a neo-institutionalist perspective with the citizens who are the members of the organization and, therefore, the first group that legitimizes the management and all the organization (Oliveira & Wiesenberg, 2016).

The discipline of strategic communication can also be of help, not only on their foundations and aims but also on the update of the recent reflections that call for the inclusion of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) perspective (Oliveira, 2017; Heide et al., 2018). The discipline of strategic communication is based on five foundational assumptions (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015; Frandsen & Johansen, 2018): (i) strategic communication is the “purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission”; (ii) all types of organizations communicate to gain influence; (iii) the communicative activities of an organization can best be viewed from an integrative perspective; (iv) all communication disciplines address the same five basic issues: identification and segmentation of stakeholders, selection of media channels, behavioral outcomes, reputation management, and the agency of communication professionals; and (5) strategy is a multidimensional concept that offers alternative understandings to strategic communication, including critical and postmodern, and is not only understood as a rational decision-making process.

Trying to read NPO communication in light of strategic communication assumptions, we may underline that NPOs, like any organization, have the need to make strategic decisions and communicate strategically to attract attention, create a good reputation and trust among their stakeholders, and communicate about the subject they campaign and maintain relationships. For that, NPOs can focus on communication activities across different fields of practice such as PR, marketing communication, social marketing campaigns, or even political communication. This means that NPOs’ strategic communication should look beyond disciplinary differences, searching for integration in all their strategies. The NPOs’ purpose is to gain legitimacy by fulfilling their communicative role in the public sphere.

To capture the full range of possibilities of NPOs, we suggest the following working definition, based on the literature on strategic communication, PR, organizational communication, and communication management:

Nonprofit communication is all the communicative processes enacted by an actor on behalf of a communicative entity in the public sphere and inside the collective, framed and governed polyphonically and according to formal and informal strategies.

In this definition, the communicative processes carried out by an actor include the aforementioned four pillars of communication. The actor is communicating on behalf of an entity, which can be a formal organization, a movement, or other collective entity. The communication is framed and governed polyphonically as it includes different perspectives and opinions within the group, framed within the main purpose of the collective. The formal strategy includes the set goals, purposes, and fulfillment of the mission set forth by management. Complementarily, the informal strategies refer to goals, purposes, and messages decided by ad hoc groups participating in the ongoing process in the public sphere and within the act of organizing.

Outline of the book

This handbook provides a thorough account of the theories, concepts, problems, and challenges that converge in nonprofit research in a changing and complex environment. The volume features four parts, which cover different aspects of the nonprofit communication sector.

The first part introduces metatheoretical and multidisciplinary approaches to the nonprofit sector, including the intersection of the definitions of democracy, civil society, and their dynamics. The second part offers distinctive structural approaches to communication and their models of reputation, marketing, and communication management. The third part focuses on strategy, communication, and discourses and on the relation between these organizations and their stakeholders and publics. Subsequently, the last part has a more applied focus and looks at campaigns and case studies.

We believe the handbook to have four main strengths. First, it is very diverse in terms of perspectives and theories. Second, it contains works from different continents and different schools of thought. Additionally, it covers ontogenesis, an understanding from a structural and strategic perspective, as well as new challenges in a networked society and case studies.

The *Routledge Handbook of Nonprofit Communication* aims to provide an overview of the multiple and complex approaches at micro, meso, and macro levels. NPO and communication studies, especially the applied field of communication sciences, can benefit from a handbook that brings together multiple and interdisciplinary perspectives and provides an outline of critical, structural, and strategic approaches, besides debating the new challenges, case studies, and recent trends on this social and communicational phenomenon. It is now up to you, dear reader, to see if it rises to the occasion.

An edited volume like this one only becomes as interesting and important as the contributors make it. As editors, we thus want to express our gratitude, first and foremost, to the 48 contributors who dedicated their valuable time and energy to making this book possible. Your perseverance amid a pandemic was inspiring. It has been a great pleasure to get to know and work together with you, and we are sincerely grateful for all the high-quality and original chapters.

We would also like to thank Felisa Salvago-Keyes and the staff at Routledge. We are grateful for all the consistent support we received during the process of conceiving, editing, and publishing the book.

As the chapters in this volume attest, NPO communication has become one of the most dynamic and diverse fields of study today. Although there is a rich and varied body of literature on the subject, it is hoped that this handbook will help to shed light on the many further avenues for research in this domain.

Notes

1 <https://uia.org/yearbook>

2 <https://nccs.urban.org/publication/nonprofit-sector-brief-2019#the-nonprofit-sector-in-brief-2019>

3 We searched for keywords and phrases, including “communication,” “non-profit,” and related words and spellings, such as “NGO,” “NPO,” “non-governmental,” “not-for-profit,” “third sector,” or “voluntary sector,” in the titles, abstract, and keywords of published works between 2012 and 2022. We then examined

each article of a sum of 389 to determine whether it had a close link with the topic of NPO communication from theoretical or empirical perspectives.

- 4 Defining what particular literature is or is not within the field of nonprofit communication can be problematic. For the sake of argument, we checked the nonprofit literature in terms of recognizable nonprofit journals indexed in WOS.
- 5 Other journals that publish on nonprofit communication in the last ten years, in descending order of the number of articles published, are the following: *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*, *Corporate Communication*, *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, *Environmental Communication*, and *Journal of Communication Management*.
- 6 The scaling-up process is central in Communication Constitutes Organization research (e.g. Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009).

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