Article:

Social media adoption in small non-profit organisations

Policy Report, Social Media and Community Volunteering: Follow On Project, January 2016

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Key policies

- Unlike in the case of small businesses there is no comprehensive Governmental policy towards small non-profit organisations, dealing instead with individual issues on a piecemeal basis
- Matters around digital transformations in the third sector receive little policy attention, and if they do they are framed narrowly as technological issues only
- Support initiatives are limited in number and those that are offered are mainly organised at local level
- Support initiatives are patchy, ad-hoc and do not address inequalities in the sector

Recommendations

- There is a need to develop comprehensive policies towards small non-profit organisations that address matters around digital transformation
- To be effective, support initiatives need to be coordinated and targeted where most needed
- Given the nature and affordances of social media small non-profit organisations would benefit from learning and sharing from each other more. Policy should encourage cross-sector initiatives in relation to social media adoption
- Policy needs to ensure that digital technologies do not reinforce inequalities in the sector, for example through targeted support

Summary of findings

- Social media are now part of the organisational infrastructure of non-profits and one of the main ways in which they communicate with the public
- Social media offer valuable opportunities to enhance the work and operation of small non-profit organisations
- Social media adoption is differentiated influenced by organisational variables and accentuated by the flexibility and affordances of social media platforms
- Certain groups of small non-profit organisations, especially those who are micro-sized, rely on volunteers more and whose resources have decreased in the past three years, struggle with implementing and using social media
- There is a need for flexible and easy to access support with social media adoption among small non-profit organisations
- A distinctive feature of social media adoption in the third sector is that these platforms are often framed as a tool for greater 'professionalisation'

"Our issue is having the staff resource to dedicate to social media - we have staff with the know-how but they do not have the time to dedicate. [Social media] is highly time-consuming." (Research participant)

"My organisation is quite small, so we are limited in what we can do. Larger organisations have established Twitter feed and so on, it means that they can communicate in a fashion that we cannot do." (Research participant)

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Context

Social media tools have permeated most aspects of social and cultural life in recent years. For example, 81% of the UK population use social media daily according to latest data (Ofcom 2015). The third sector is no exception and use of social media in non-profit organisations has expanded significantly (Guo and Saxton 2014; Miranda and Steiner 2012) as popularity of campaigns such as the Ice Bucket Challenge exemplifies. Findings of this study[1] also shows that a large section of the sector regularly use social media (Figure 1) and the tools are part of the organisational infrastructure of non-profits.

Social media offer opportunities for small non-profits that in the current austerity environment are especially beneficial. These include raising awareness, improving communication with stakeholders, fundraising, providing access to additional resources, help with recruitment of employees and volunteers.

*Figure 1 – Frequency of posting content (% of study respondents)*
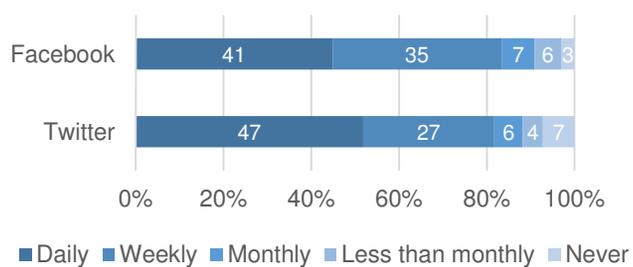
Discussion of findings

The results of the study show that social media have had a considerable impact on organisational practices of non-profits especially in relation to external communication and communication with the public. Social media emerged as the most typical way in which small non-profits communicate with the general public more important than contacting them via leaflets/posters, face-to-face or email. The study also revealed that about half of small non-profits (52%) saw social media as essential for their organisation to carry out its work, and the majority (83%) agreed that social media offer great opportunities for their organisations.

However, the extent to which the organisation is adopting social media and can reap the benefits, as well as the degree to which social media create additional pressure vary greatly among small non-profits (Figure 2). The study found that organisations who are micro-sized, rely on volunteers more and whose resources have decreased in the past three years struggle with implementing and using social media. This is an important issue as these organisations play a crucial role in the communities they serve and their beneficiaries are often individuals who are disadvantaged. It also means that 'Digital by Default' policies do not just disadvantage individuals (Digital by Default 2016) but also organisations in the third sector.

*Figure 2 – Perceptions about social media adoption (% of study respondents)*
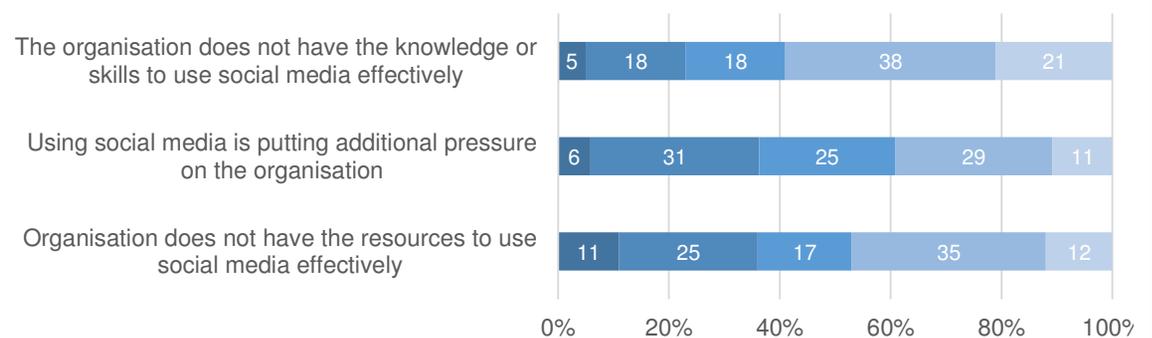
Note: on a scale from strongly agree (dark shaded area) to strongly disagree (light shaded area)
[1] For information about the study, its methodology and detailed findings see Gulyas (2016).

Discussion of findings

The study also explored the ways in which small non-profit organisations could be supported with social media adoption. Such support is justified for two policy reasons: first, to realise the opportunities the tools do offer, and second to address the issue of digital inequalities among third sector organisations. Two key areas of support were identified: access to designated funding or resources and provision of training and advice about using social media. Both areas include a variety of initiatives, but the ones that are easiest to access, notably free online resources, are perceived to be the most useful by non-profits (Figure 3). However, findings also suggest that support mechanisms for those organisations that struggle most with social media adoption need to be flexible and tailored to the needs of the organisation.

Figure 3 – Perceived usefulness of selected support initiatives (% of study respondents)
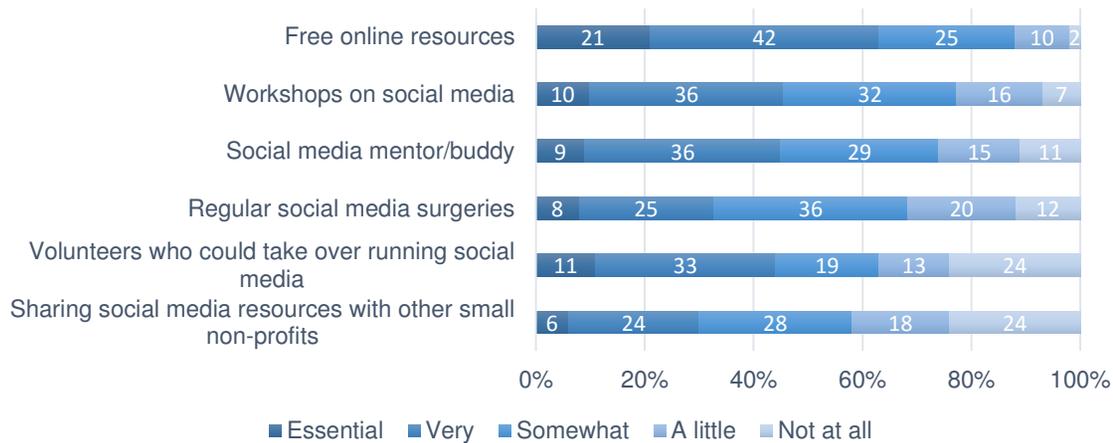
To make them effective support initiatives need to be embedded in comprehensive policies towards small non-profit organisations that address matters around digital transformation. They also need to be coordinated and target those organisations in most need. Policy should also encourage cross-sector initiatives and learning and sharing among non-profit organisations, which are limited at the moment.

References

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