

**The necessity for social media in the development of external communication skills: The International Federation of Settlements Neighbourhood Centers (IFS)**

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## Abstract

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In the year 2020, the coronavirus pandemic, also known as COVID-19, resulted in a sudden and unforeseen disruption to many industries worldwide. Businesses and organizations were forced to rapidly reorganize, digitalize, and switch all their work systems and routines into virtual services. Governments announced social distancing measures to slow the spread of coronavirus pandemic. During the outbreak, social media the most active and fastest way of modern communication have played a significant role in how people communicate, remain connected and engaged in society. Research reported that Nearly half a billion new users have joined social media networks raising the total users' number to nearly 4.2 billion at the beginning of 2021.

This research examines the necessity for social media in communication teams of the IFS Network member organizations. It explores how communication representatives use or integrate social media networks as an essential communication tool, mainly focusing on external communication. For this purpose, the author has explored and defined several communication concepts, existing research and information on communication, external communication, nonprofits communication and crisis management. As a support to the relevancy and validity of this research, the author has conducted different qualitative interviews and done observational visits to collect and analyze the gathered data.

The findings indicate that most of the IFS Networks member organizations, federations and individual organizations included have a presence on social media. Some are very active with good social media strategies; others are present, struggling with finding an engaged staff, time to concentrate on social media activities and an effective strategy. In contrast, one of the local organizations present in the research was not interested in integrating this communication tool in their activities. The reason is to stay away from the pros of using social media. The social media platform of choice for most of the participants is Facebook. Additionally, most communication teams representatives indicated that the sudden arrival of the health crisis impacted how they communicate with their members and adapting to the new normal was challenging.

All the IFS Network's communication teams are recommended to analyze their use of social media networks and explore the necessity for developing and integrating social media networks as an effective and efficient communication tool. The members are encouraged to analysis their current online presence situation by using SOSTAC planning model, a simple and easy to use digital marketing planning guide used to plan digital marketing or overall marketing strategy or improving individual channel tactics. Communication teams are recommended to search and compare their use of social media with other similar organizations, create a simple social media strategy with elements such as research, content, promotion, and measurement. The use of a content calendar and crisis communication for social media is highly recommended as well.

**Keywords**

Non-profits communication, social media, crisis management, external communication.

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## 1 Introduction

In just a few years, social media as a major player in modern communication with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Vimeo and others have rapidly been embraced by individuals, organizations, businesses and politics as one of the most effective, fast and best way of reaching targeted audiences (Al-Deen, H. S. N. & Hendricks, J. A. 2011, 16.). Social media channels have proved to be among the most popular and rapid ways of communicating, sharing ideas and thoughts, networking, reaching, and interacting with local and global audiences, especially in times of crisis.

In December 2019, the novel coronavirus originated from Wuhan, China, was identified, the disease started to spread widely worldwide. The World Health Organization months later declared it as a pandemic. To reduce the increase of infectious cases, governments worldwide announced social distancing measures to slow the spread of coronavirus pandemic and prevent new contamination cases from appearing.

In the year 2020, the coronavirus pandemic, also known as COVID-19, resulted in a sudden, unforeseen, and enormous disruption to many industries worldwide. Businesses and organisations were forced to reorganise, digitalise, and switch all their work system and routines into virtual services swiftly. Large events like annual general meetings and other face-to-face gatherings were postponed, cancelled, or held via Zoom, Teams or other video conferencing tools which are not always easy to use by most. However, reorganising and digitalising the entire work and communication systems confronted communicators with a whole range of challenges.

On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be a calamity in the history of a global society. On the other hand, it seems to be a good opportunity for most organisations to examine their use of social media networks before and during the pandemic and develop efficient and effective social media strategies and create learning opportunities for communicators. Much has been said and written about how the Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc globally. Still, various positive outcomes can turn this disruption into learning and positive change's opportunity (Hughes 2020.).

The social distancing measures forced most of the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centers (IFS), a global movement of more than 11000 members associated with multi-purpose, community-based organisations Settlements Houses and Neighbourhood Centers, to close their doors. The IFS members adopted technology-driven solu-

tions to communicate crucial information and serve communities and stakeholders via different communication channels such as video conferencing, email, phone calls, social media platforms and other digital communication tools.

The very essence of Settlement and Neighbourhood Houses has always been working together for better communities. The social distancing measures impacted and challenged the functioning of the IFS members worldwide, pushing them to find rapid solutions to the situation by switching their services from face-to-face to virtual activities.

The International Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers (IFS) is a global nonprofit movement of more than 11000 member associations, including multi-purpose, community-based organizations worldwide. The IFS Network's mission is to build an inclusive global community that empowers, inspires, and connects people working for social justice. Members of the IFS Network are Community or Neighbourhood Houses. They are welcoming spaces open to everyone from all walks of life to participate, lead and learn through different services, programs, and community building.

Previous research studied a group of non-profits' leaders to explore their use of social media technologies to operate their activities, the research revealed that non-profits were slow in embracing the opportunities offered by the fast-growing social interactive mediums (Waters, 2010). Most non-profits examined were hesitant to take the plunge and incorporate this modern time communication tool into their communication strategies, daily activities, and budgets. The communication challenges observed and reported by the IFS Network communication teams during the sudden arrival of the COVID-19 set the alarm signal for this research. The thesis focuses on examining the use of social media by some of the communications representatives of the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centers (IFS). This paper aims to examine how different IFS Network members, such as federations and a few local organizations, use social media as part of their communications operations (Chapter 3). Additionally, the author, who is also part of the communications teams of the IFS Network, has explored and defined different concepts and theories related to communications in both corporate and non-profits communications (Chapter 2). Moreover, qualitative interviews, and a digital communications meeting are conducted and transcripts analyzed to reinforce the relevance of this research.

This thesis will serve as a stimulus material and call to action for communications leaders and their teams to have a critical look at their use of social media now. This paper aims to encourage the utilization of social media as an effective and efficient external communication tool to reach large or targeted audiences, engage and show the relevance of the organization's message and most importantly, help the international Federation become a

thought leader in community work. Additionally, it will help those reluctant, overwhelmed by the idea of using social media networks or who do not know where to start with their social media strategy.

The IFS Network is an umbrella organization for its members in different countries and continents worldwide; this paper includes an empirical research conducted with communication leaders and representatives from various countries and continents. The empirical research is based on two qualitative interviews, questionnaires, and a digital meeting with communication representatives.

The author opted to narrow the research to 3 Federations and two local organizations from North America, Oceania, Africa, and Europe. The process allowed for a broad but clear picture of the use of social media at both the federations and individual member level to compare them with each other without any risk of speculation or industry biases. The digital meeting was an opportunity for communication to express their feelings and share their thoughts on social media in community work before and during the pandemic. The research outcomes, analysis, and conclusion are in the last chapter of the thesis. Lastly, the author gathered vital lessons from the research to produce a guideline and provide recommendations to support the utilization of social media in the organization's communications and for preparedness with the hope that further research could be conducted with this paper as a foundation.

## 2 Theoretical framework

Communication has a central position in any organisations' development and success (Hargie 2016). It is essential to building relationships with people around us and anywhere else in the world (Resources techniques, 2018a.). Therefore, it seems necessary to first understand the meaning and concept of communication before diving further into this paper. The first part of this paper will present communication and external communication as concepts and introduce different communication channels. Furthermore, these two concepts will lead the paper to the study of other modern communication methods that will serve as a base and help understand this research's need.

### 2.1 Definition of communication

Communication in any organisations' development and success. It is essential to building relationships with people around us and anywhere else in the world (Resources techniques, 2018b.). Therefore, it seems necessary to first understand the meaning and concept of communication before diving further into this paper. The first part of this paper will present communication and external communication as concepts and introduce different communication channels. Furthermore, these two concepts will lead the paper to the study of other modern communication methods that will serve as a base and help understand this research's need.

The Cambridge Academic Dictionary (2021) defines the noun communication as " the process by which messages or information is sent from one place or person to another, or the message itself".

Gurav (2020) describes communication as the exchange of thoughts, ideas, emotions, and opinions. Communication is sharing information with an individual or group of people. Communication initiates relationships and assists in making organising possible. People use communication as a tool to convey messages to reach an objective or goal. Like in society in general, communication plays a significant role in any organisation's functioning, success, and future. Organisations and businesses use communication as a medium to help transmit messages, stay in constant contact with people within and outside.

A thorough look at communication shows that communication involves the transmission of verbal and non-verbal messages. This process comprises a sender, a receiver, and a channel of communication. The primary characteristic of communication is that both the sender and receiver are engaged in a communication system (Losee,1999.). Communicating has more in it than the conveying of information. The term communication requires a successful

transmitting of or imparting of information, emotions, opinions, or ideas. The sender encodes the message in verbal or non-verbal communication. The message is transmitted through a medium, and the receiver decodes it (SkillsYouNeed, 2021.).

Lumen Learning illustrates the process of communication as follows. In figure 1, the sender puts his thought into words which result in an encoded message. The receiver as a recipient receives the message by hearing and considering their meaning which also called listening.

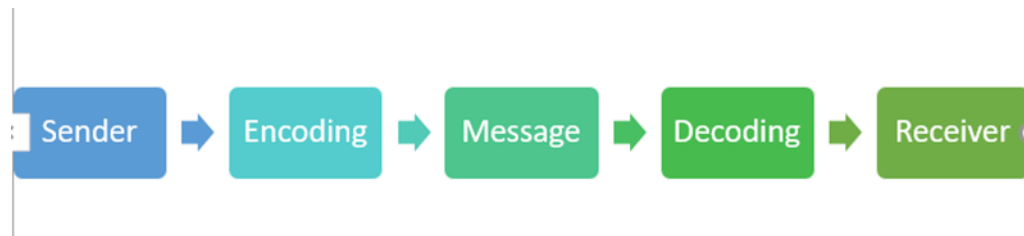


Figure 1. Communication process illustration (LumenLearning)

The communication process' illustration in figure 2 shows that during the encoding and decoding process are susceptible to errors or misunderstandings. When that happens, it causes noise, and when the message needs repetition or clarification for a better understanding, it is called feedback.

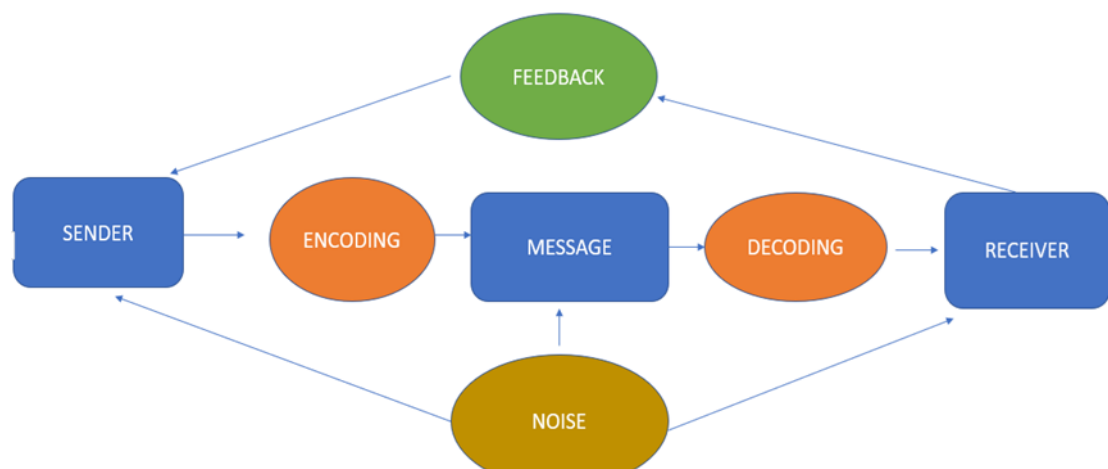


Figure 2. Communication process illustration (LumenLearning)

Overall, communication is sending, receiving, or exchanging opinions, information, and ideas so that both parties have a complete understanding of the message. In the business world, communication has various definitions according to sectors, fields, and professions. Fonseca, Journal of Communication (2013) describes business communication as a particular type of communication that uses different methods and tools to perform business. Smarp (2020), on the other hand, describes business communication as the process a company or organisation uses to share information between employees internally and externally. So, business communication could be defined as any means that supports a business



or organisation's functioning. That could be management, promotion, advertising, marketing, public relations, branding or sales.

## 2.2 Communication strategy

Communication strategy is a concept established for efficient and effective Communication to meet an organisation's long-term goals and objectives. It can represent, for example, a plan to achieve communications objectives (WikiFinancedpedia, 2020.).

In many cases, Non-profits organisations are managed by small teams and a thin budget. This issue often leads to communication teams remaining at the bottom of priorities. However, it is possible to have a solid communication team no matter the organisation's size and accomplish a lot with a limited budget. Bergman (2020a) and many other authors suggest that non-profit organisations need simply measurable and adaptable strategies custom-built according to the organisations needs and goals.

The author offers a strategy template focused on digital communications not to be considered as a definitive guide. Based on tested and factual marketing best practices.

The author offers a detailed guide strategy based on five main pillars:

1. **Objectives:** having a strategy with an aim to ensure the focus and adequately defined objectives. The answer to the question "why" is an excellent start to guide the strategy. The goals of non-profits marketing may vary but, they remain centred around:
  - **Raising awareness:** the non-profits is a brand and raising awareness calls attention to the organisation and work.
  - **Raising funds:** depending on the organisations and the goals, these are donations from trusts, the State, other institutions, or individual donors.
  - **Recruiting volunteers:** volunteers are essential to most non-profits organisations. Promoting an honourable and a good cause can help in attracting volunteers.
2. **Target audiences:** identifying an intended audience is vital—a well-tailored communication intended for a specific audience. This can be the external or internal stakeholders, their goals and how to engage with them. Creating personas is an

excellent way to start as it helps in understanding whom you are communicating with. Collecting data is one way of knowing personas.

3. **Messaging:** the messaging should be simple, easy to understand and consistent in all the organisation's channels. One of the effective ways to go about this could be mapping out core messages that ease the audience's understanding and draw the organisation near its goals.
4. **Content:** generally, the audience goes through stages or funnel in traditional marketing:
  - a) **Awareness:** the target becomes aware of the service or offer. This stage comprises easy-to-understand content such as videos, blog posts, newsletters, infographics, and earned media.
  - b) **Consideration:** the target considers the offer or service. At this point, the audience of choice conducts due diligence. This stage includes case studies, webinars, or detailed articles.
  - c) **Decision:** the target decides to accept the offer or service. This is the final stage. At this stage, the organisation could use emails or other strategies depending on their final goals.

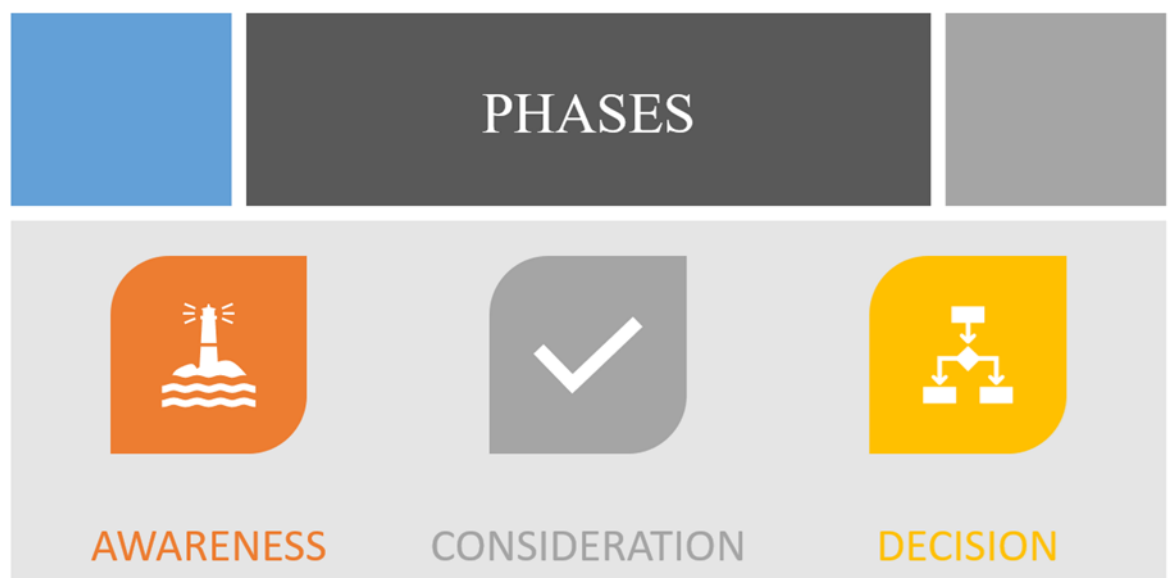


Figure 3. Target audience phases illustration (Medium.com 2020)

The stages in figure 3 are usually for Profit-organisations, but Non-profit's communication teams can use them with minor modifications. For examples, only use stage one, awareness or stage two, consideration. The most important here is to map out relevant content types for each phase. However, it is crucial to have content for each one of these stages, suggests the author.

5. **Channels:** channels constitute the last pillar of the five pillars. At this level, objectives are set, target audiences identified, the message established, and the content types well determined. The end step is distribution. The author advises determining the channels appropriate to the organisation's needs, and this is done based on the objectives and target audiences.

Subsequently, decide on the following for each channel:

- a) **Purpose:** for example, sharing content or having individual consultation or engagement with the audience.
- b) **Success:** determining how successful is the channel.
- c) **Failure:** determining what could be the failure for the chosen channel.

To summarise the above and as stated in the introduction of this subchapter, this guide is simply one of the best approaches to help communication teams in non-profits start the conversation around their communication strategies. Creating a strategy requires the involvement of various team members. This process is a series of repeated steps to improve with each phase and takes time to get it right. Thus, it is crucial to create ways to measure the progress and scale the procedure (Bergmark 2020b.).

## 2.3 Strategic communication

Strategic Communication indicates the significant concerns behind communicative efforts in an organisation to promote or strengthen its mission. It is an increasingly evolving subject within communication (Thorson, 2018.). Strategic communication in an organisational communicates a thoughtful organisational and communications-specific goals-oriented message with a targeted audience and through the proper channels (Englin, in IDEA 2011.).

Having a communications strategy is essential to the success of any organization; a communications strategy infused with well-structured efforts, an agenda, and a master plan is

a strategic communication (IDEA, 2011.). A strategic process assists in creating an organizations' communications strategy and steer to achieve the marketing objectives desired.

Villet (2018) describes the strategic communications process as a set of activities put in place to achieve successful marketing campaigns that the author calls ACE:

- a) **Align:** Businesses and organizations need to align to customers or communities they serve by creating messages et experiences, creating media and engaging with audiences where they are. The main idea is to align what is to offer the people in the communities, be it a product, service, thought, social program or behaviour, and strive to find what truly matters.
- b) **Create:** Creating values, a message and media that express the truth.
- c) **Engage:** Engaging the people or community with the organization's message and experience where they are. And this can be through organic content, outreach, social media, or other communications channels. The main goal to find a targeted audience and their touchpoint, which can be one channel or multiple ones depending on the goals or budget.

Most of the research done indicates that strategic communication is perhaps the first step before creating any communication strategy that is not focused on impressions but rather concrete outcomes. Strategic communication ranges from marketing to policy, depending on the nature of the organization. According to Emily Thynes (in IDEA 2011), co-author of a guidebook for non-profits, strategic communications in non-profits is a coordinated use of communication channels to influence and move, impact public policy, or foster an agenda. On the contrary, strategic communication planning in for-profits or corporation focuses mainly on promoting products.

## 2.4 External Communication

Study.com (2015) defines external communication as the process of transmitting information between a business and another person or another organisation outside of your organisation's environment. The people outside of your entity could be current or potential customers, shareholders, partners, potential new members, funders, investors, and communities. It is simply how organisations or businesses exchange or disseminate their messages both within and outside the organisation. Its purpose is to facilitate smooth communication between organisations or people.

Despite being two different entities, internal and external communication are vital for organisations or businesses performance and success. Notably, internal communication has other objectives and delivers messages to different audiences. It is essential to ensure that both are oriented to support and unify the organisations' goals and messages (Smarp, 2020).

### **External communication has two different forms:**

1. **Formal external communication:** formal external communication is the primary steps to building an organisation's image. It presents the organisation's main goal and shares its most important message, the work and essence of the organisation with the outside world through the website, reports, memos, official meetings, and declarations made and newsletters.
2. **Informal external communication:** informal external communication is what the organisation or business cannot directly control. The employees take in and deepen their knowledge of the organisation from daily work activities. Informal external communication often happens when employees share that knowledge of the organisation with the external public (Smarp 2020.).

### **2.4.1 External Communication Strategy**

It is known that people communicate to bring change or achieve a goal. Thus, communication needs to be goal oriented. As an essential process in any organization's communication, external communication needs its strategy to be effective. Business and organization engage in different strategies processes called strategies to manage their external communication. Different approaches used in external communication vary according to the purpose, circumstances, and the intended recipient. For example, an organization will communicate differently with shareholders, customers or potential investors and funders for non-profits. Some of the known communication approaches are public relations, where entities use psychological and sociological knowledge to present their activities and image positively. Media relations, on the other hand, represent how organizations and businesses communicate with the media. This approach tries to promote good relationships with the media and its members to influence their story's interpretation and presentation to the public. Moreover, advertising is a persuasive form of communication directed to the public. All those strategies are the processes that external communication uses to transmit information between an entity and the public or customers (Study.com 2017.).

According to Kunsman (2020), external communication requires using various tactics to send information to the public. This includes shareholders, stakeholders, funders, customers in case of a business and how the public identifies with the organization.

### 2.4.2 The advantages of a Strategic External Communication

Building an effective external communications strategy is not an easy task. However, carefully thought external communication strategy could help translate the organisation's brand message to different audiences and achieve various brand's objectives (Fabrik Brands 2021a). Additionally, the article adds that external communication is not all about marketing; it also allows for real connections and valuable discussions with those external to the brand or organisation. Other most essential values from external communication are:

1. **Inform:** Raise awareness about the organisation's mission, objectives, work, and goals for the future.
2. **Sustain:** build long and lasting connections and relationships with the external public, who could be shareholders, partners, or members. The organisation remains unforgettable and in touch with the people who matter.
3. **Engage:** the conversation with members, partners, shareholders, and other external parties is continually fundamental for organisations.
4. **Sell:** the organisation's activities and services are perceptible, valuable, and indispensable and existing. Marketing and promoting the organisation's services, products or activities to the stakeholders and targeted audiences help keep the funders or investors confident in their investment.
5. **Grow:** external communication contributes to the organisation's consistent growth in terms of connections, networking, and engaging with different audiences or stakeholders.

With the emergence of social media, employees brand ambassador and advocacy campaigns, the difference between internal and external communication is thinning. Nonetheless, external communication help to communicate the organization's activities and the brand's purpose to the public.

## 2.5 External Communication Channels

In general, external communication has a variety of channels. A channel of communication is the means the organisation uses to transmit its message (Study.com 2015). Communication channels include website and blogging, conferences and other live events, social media, email and newsletters and press releases (Fabrik Brands 2021b).

Figure 3 below illustrates some of the common communication channels used by organisations and businesses. The illustration displays some of the common internal communication channels as well.

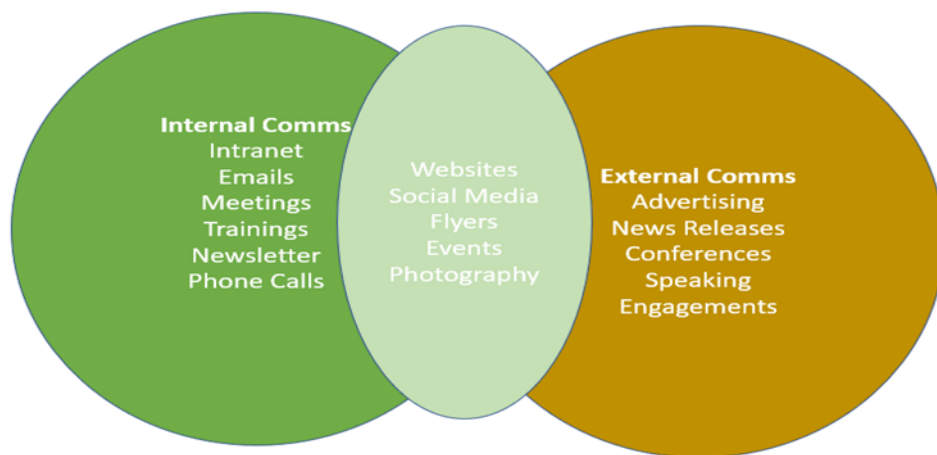


Figure 3. Channels of communication illustration (Chanty.com 2019)

### 2.5.1 Introduction to social media

Social media is one of the prominent communications channels of modern time. A product of the digital era, social media has transformed and changed the way people communicate in business and everyday life.

Investopedia (2020) defines social media as a computer-based technology used to facilitate sharing information, thoughts, and ideas through creating networks and communities. Social media enables fast electronic communication of content via the internet. The information comes from documents, videos, personal information or photos, and users engage via smartphones, computers, applications, smartphones, or web-based software.

Datareportal (2020a) released its Digital 2020 October Global Statshot Report produced in partnership with Hootsuite and We Are Social. The report indicates that more than 4 billion people use social media monthly, and nearly 2 million new users join different social media networks daily.

The report points out that much of the social media use growth results from the social distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, while the return to normal might play on the numbers, the figures will not fall considerably.

Nations (2021) studies the term social media and defines each word separately:

- **Social:** communicating or interacting with others by sharing and receiving information.
- **Media:** instrument or channel used to communicate, such as the internet.

Most people use social media and social networking interchangeably. However, the author highlights the difference between the two concepts:

- **Media:** refers to the information shared, such as a video or a link to an article.
- **Networking:** it is the relationship with a specific audience and whom that audience represents. The network can be colleagues, relatives, customers, or strangers.

Social media is a platform used to broadcast information, whereas social networking is a platform people use to communicate. Social networking is a subcategory of social media.

## 2.5.2 Social Media Networks

From Social Networks, video sharing, blogging, business networks, discussion networks, reviews networks, media networks and more, Social media comes in the form of various technology-enabled activities. Below are some of the most famous social media networks used by most organisations and businesses.

A social media platform is an online and mobile-based Internet application that enables the creation, exchange and access of content generated by users (Technopedia 2021).

There are many social media platforms, but this paper will focus on the most popular ones:

1. **Facebook:** Created in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook is the most used and prominent social media network in the market. It is a networking platform used to share images, post links, and any other content live or in the form of video. Businesses use Facebook to build and promote online brands, create connections, and stay in touch with customers, employees and grow their productivity. As of 2020, Facebook counts 2.6 billion monthly active users.



2. **Youtube:** Youtube is a video-sharing platform created in 2005 by three former PayPal employees. It is one of the largest and most popular video-sharing platforms on the Internet. Users create upload, share and view videos.
3. **Instagram:** Instagram is a highly visual platform and photo-sharing application that allows users to share images or videos and interact with their audiences. Instagram was launched in 2010, and the app racked up 25,000 users in just one day (Investopedia 2020). Instagram reached 1 billion monthly active users in 2018.
4. **Twitter:** Twitter allows users to stay on top trending topics and engage in different conversations. While Twitter has as much users as other platforms such as Facebook, it has a highly engaged users' base.
5. **LinkedIn:** LinkedIn is among the most popular B2B and professional's social media sites. LinkedIn allows users to grow their professional expertise, share their portfolios, search, and apply for employment. Some use it to publish blog posts as well.

The rise of social media has a massive impact on individuals and organisations. Companies use platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and others to promote brand and advertisement, engage in conversations, and create communities with customers, partners, and stakeholders. However, succeeding on social media remains a challenge for most organisations. A strategic approach to using social media can help address those challenges in the for-profits and non-profits field (Effing 2013).

### 2.5.3 Social Media Strategy

A social media strategy includes all the activities or plans implemented to maximise engagement and interactions and minimise risks to achieve intended results on an organisation's social media sites (Fox 2019.).

It is known that people communicate to bring change or achieve a goal. Thus, communication needs to be goal-oriented. As an essential process in any organization's communication, external communication needs its strategy to be effective. Business and organization engage in different strategies processes called strategies to manage their external communication. Different approaches used in external communication vary according to the purpose, circumstances, and the intended recipient. For example, an organization will communicate differently with shareholders, customers or potential investors and funders for non-profits. Some of the known communication approaches are public relations, where entities use psychological and sociological knowledge to positively present their activities and

image. Media relations, on the other hand, represent how organizations and businesses communicate with the media. This approach tries to promote good relationships with the media and its members to influence their story's interpretation and presentation to the public. Moreover, advertising is a persuasive form of communication directed to the public. All those strategies are the processes that external communication uses to transmit information between an entity and the public or customers (Study.com 2017.).

According to Kunsmann (2020), external communication requires various tactics to send information to the public. This includes shareholders, stakeholders, funders, customers in case of a business and how the public identifies with the entity.

A social media strategy includes everything planned to accomplish with the hope of reaching social media goals. It is a strategic approach that sets actions to tell whether a plan will succeed or fail. A social media strategy needs to be simple, following a specific plan and concise (Hootsuite 2020.).

A successful social media strategy is set on SMART goals and aligns with the objectives and goals of the entity. On November 4, 2008, Barack Obama won the United States presidential election 2008. It is proven that during his campaign, he was able to mobilize the public using social media and raised awareness and financial support for his campaign. He used more than 15 social networking sites. His usage of the internet is compared to the adoption of television and radio by John F. Kennedy and Franklin D. Roosevelt (Wikipedia 2021.). Research has shown that many other non-profits and commercial organizations have achieved their communication goals successfully with an effective social media strategy.

Committing to using social media in commercial and non-profits organizations can be beneficial, but it also comes with risks to consider before committing to using it.

## **2.6 Communication in Non-profits Organizations**

Communication has a central position in any organisations' development and success (Hargie, O. 2016.). This concept applies to non-profits organisations as well. Investopedia (2020) defines non-profits organisations as any businesses exempted from tax status because they promote social causes and provide public benefits. Non-profit is a legal term referring to organisations that may use revenues only to further non-profit-making or educational purposes rather than earn profits to owners or shareholders. Most of non-profits focus on education, health, and social services (Frey & Cissna 2009).

According to Gonçalves, Evandro and Duarte (2016), researchers have shown interest in communication in the public and organisational environments over the past century. Due to civil society and the community's engagement in tackling social issues in part through digital communication, non-profit communication relevancy and visibility have increased.

The authors indicate that Non-profit communication is a platform for cultured citizens to openly disagree about crucial social issues. Despite its importance, Non-profit's communication suffers from a lack of proper definition in communication research. Communication is an essential tool for the development and success of any organisation. However, no communication is effective without a strategy.

### **2.6.1. Social media and non-profits organisations communications**

According to Nonprofitssource (2020), Non-profits share an average of 1.2 Facebook updates and up to 5.3 Twitter updates daily. 6 billion non-profits videos are viewed in the year 2016. 55% of people who engage with non-profits on Twitter take actions at the end. 30 % of non-profits are on Instagram to raise awareness and funding. More than 4 billion people use social media monthly, and nearly 2 million new users join different social media networks daily (Datareportal, 2020b).

The innovations in communication technologies open doors to an environment where people can participate in global or local discussions, share ideas, creations, and thoughts. Social media can gather crowds, facilitate, and increase engagement. Many studies on this subject show that most people spend a great time of their lives in the social media environment, whether to network, learn or socialize. Social media is the most powerful communication medium for its timing information and instant communication characteristics. Social media comes with its share of cons. It is sometimes subject to loss of control, misinterpretation, negative publicity, and the impression of wasting time and resources, mainly in non-profits where the transmitted message must be correctly transmitted (Milla et al, 2018).

According to Non-profits source (2020), Non-profits share an average of 1.2 Facebook updates and 5.3 Twitter updates daily. Six billion non-profits videos are viewed in the year 2016. 55% of people who engage with non-profits on Twitter take actions at the end. 30 % of non-profits are on Instagram to raise awareness and funding.

Previous research to understand how non-profits integrate social media and digital communication into their strategies indicates that most non-profits rely on emails and websites to communicate; even though many of them are on social media, most non-profits still use

social networks to share events and activities. The minority of non-profits use social networks to post issue-centred content to create thought leadership in their focus areas (Creedon 2014).

### 2.6.2. The importance of social media in non-profits external communication

MissionBox (2020) encourages Non-profits to use social media networks. It allows non-profits to reach a much larger audience fast and cost-efficiently, organization's storytelling, engagement and increased brand awareness and promotion.

Qualman (2012), author of Socialnomics, way before that stated that there is no choice whether to do social media; the question is how well it is done. What does this mean for non-profits?

Nowadays, almost everything happens online. Supporting a good cause, advocacy or fund-raising is no different. Those are just a few reasons why non-profits hope to stand out from the crowd and have a solid online presence (Ross 2018a.).

There are numerous ways to achieve that, but here are a few basics that non-profits can use:

- **Digital marketing:** Digital marketing or online marketing uses mobile devices, social media, the internet, website, content, and other channels to reach targeted audiences (Investopedia 2020). Digital marketing includes email marketing, one of the best ways to reach supporters and other audiences, keep them up to date in the least expensive way, social media presence and donation pages. Content with a great source of information on the organization's services; regular engagement with supporters to thank them and ask them to share what they supported and why through their social networks; Finally, keeping clear and easy to navigate website (Ross 2018b.).
- **Branding:** Branding is a set of concrete and invisible features designed to create and build an organization's, person's, service's or place's awareness, identity, and reputation (Sammut-Bonnici 2015). A brand is what a specific audience does with the material shared with them through their design, messaging, culture, and values (Neumeier 2019). Nonprofit's organizations need new models that allow brands to support their social impact, holding into the organization's values and culture and serving the mission. A brand is a bridge between the program's strategy and external communications (Kylander & Stone 2012.).

Social media has changed the traditional ways of doing marketing beyond imagination. Most organisations and businesses acknowledge that embracing social media marketing is crucial in communication.

However, the sudden arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic took the use of social media to another level. From social distancing restrictions to the series of lockdowns and working from home. These "new normal" practices recommended by governments to flatten the curve have created the need to search and implement the most efficient and effective ways to communicate, connect and engage in communication teams and society in general.

During these challenging times, social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter came to the rescue, allowing businesses to carry on functioning and marketing and people to stay connected. Just like businesses, non-profits faced with the challenges are discovering the necessity for social media marketing in remaining visible and relevant and providing crucial information and ideas during the pandemic to different to the larger audiences.

Social media users in this century are not only users. They are influencers with friends and more friends. Integrating social media in non-profits communication emails can help find supporters and have them involved and engaged in conversations that matter. Identifying an organization's supporters through a message can help maximize the organization's message life span, increase fundraising, brand promotion, engagement and thought leadership.

### 3 Crisis communication

A crisis is anything that prevent an organization from fulfilling its mission. It can be something real, perceived, human error, something that cannot be controlled or caused by nature. A crisis refers to any unwanted events or major disturbances or unrest leading individuals in a workplace to unrest. Generally, crisis occur fast brings a feeling of threat and fear in an organization. Having a plan in place can alleviate the harm that a crisis can bring or avoid it all together. Good planning can benefit most organizations. It is not a matter of if a crisis can occur but rather when it will occur. The most important here is to assess what the problem is, find where the harm or the damage to the reputation of the organization. Another essential step is to find where the key audience and how best to reach them and figure out the right message for the situation. The best solution is to prepare an organization for a crisis before it even occurs and as there no damage at that point (TriadStrategies 2012a.).

The part of the organization that deals with the individuals and the organization's reputation is referred to as crisis communication. It aims to protect the organization's reputation and image. Communication in time of crisis is important because it gives a clear knowledge of the issue to be contained to avoid speculation through communication.

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The crisis communication task is overseeing the individuals and organization's reputation and image. It aims to protect the organization's reputation and image. Communication in time of crisis is important because it gives a clear knowledge of the issue to be contained to avoid speculation through communication.

### 3.1 Social media crisis management

In early December 2019, the novel coronavirus human cases were identified in Wuhan, China. At that time, nobody could have imagined that the new disease would later become one of the most challenging global health crises of all times. The virus COVID-19 has claimed nearly 3,11M lives to date (worldometers 2021) and affected everyone, businesses and organisations of all sizes and shapes globally. This global crisis shows the importance of having a crisis management plan that includes a strategic social media management plan in an organisation or business of any kind.

The coronavirus outbreak is just an example of the kind of crisis that can hit any entity.

Coombs (2015) defines crisis communication as the applied field that provides guidance and protocols that allow managers of an organisation or business to communicate efficiently to minimise any harm or critical situation that can constitute a significant threat to the organisation.

A communication crisis can be seen as any significant threat to the organisation's reputation or operations, leading to adverse outcomes for different stakeholders involved with the organisations if not dealt with correctly. Furthermore, the author focuses on the emergence of Social Media that he presents as the bleeding edge of a driving force of communication crisis. According to the author, a social media crisis is the rise or escalation of a situation or event.

Essentially, social media crises are harm or risks managed by the organisation in the public's view. Coombs' definition shows that any company that uses social media needs to be ready with a crisis communication response or code of conduct if an incident occurs.

Social media crisis or damage can come from a blog post, tweets, statements, spelling typos, inappropriate opinions, or even news published too early. This crisis can happen at any time and need handling promptly to prevent the situation from getting out of control. Starting a crisis plan during one is the worst strategy. Pre-crisis planning is essential to solving a social media crisis. The Armano (2011) social media crisis management framework recommends four steps to follow:

1. Listening: Monitoring different conversations, which could be complaints or other issues.

2. Assessing: Analyzing and determining what has happened by data and facts collection.
3. Engaging: Engage privately in case of adverse outcomes to avoid any public dispute. Reacting to a positive outcome is optional but recommended.
4. Repeat: Repeat the same process any time a social media crisis occurs.

The sources of crisis in communication can come in different sizes and shapes. The next subchapter will focus on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on non-profits and community work. Understanding how this crisis affected organisations, businesses, and primarily non-profits is crucial to know what a pandemic is.

### **3.2 The Covid-19 pandemic**

In December 2019, the novel coronavirus causing severe respiratory issues, pneumonia included, was identified in Wuhan, China. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the first outbreak of novel coronavirus a “public health emergency of international concern”. With several countries reporting cases of Covid-19 all over the world, on March 11, 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 a global pandemic due to its scale and speed of transmission (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2021.).

Covid-19 is an infectious and worldwide spread disease caused by the coronavirus. The virus is very contagious and can spread rapidly among people. People infected by the virus presented lots of respiratory issues. Older people and those with medical problems like diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, cardiovascular and more are the most vulnerable and can, in some cases, quickly develop into severe illness.

Research and analysis suggest that coronavirus is from animals’ origin, probably bats, and transmitted to other animals such as pangolins before reaching humans in Wuhan City, China (Liu, Kuo & al. 2020.). The authors add that the COVID-19 is undoubtedly the fifth human coronavirus. The virus primarily spreads through saliva droplets or nose discharge while coughing or sneezing from infected subjects. The best way to prevent the infection is by washing hands frequently, wearing masks and keeping a distance from each other’s and self-isolation in case of contamination, being well informed about the virus and different ways it spreads.



Nowadays, the number of infectious cases has dropped in most countries with the help of at least seven different vaccines to combat coronavirus. The first mass vaccination distribution started in early December 2020, and by February 2021, a significant number of vaccines is administered.

### **3.3 The impact of the coronavirus on non-profits communication**

In April 2020, the International Federation of Settlement and Neighborhood Centers (IFS), a global movement of more than 11000 member associations including multi-purpose, community-based organization across the world, gathered in the midst pandemic to report and share the impacts of the pandemic on community work. In their reports, all the international representatives from different part of the globe shared their struggles, lessons and concerns and actions taken to cope with the crisis. Among the challenges reported were the closing of all community and neighbourhood houses that are for most youth, seniors, immigrants or just members of communities as a second home and bumping spaces for people from different backgrounds, social isolation, food security, digital inclusion, circulation of fake news, emotional and mental health, Uncertainty in almost everything, economic crisis, unemployment, increase in domestic violence and more. The coronavirus crisis highlighted most of the unseen inequalities in communities due to social distancing restrictions (IFSNetwork, 2020a.).

Representatives and community workers from Italy reported that they worked from home as they were in a “complete lockdown” and to meet face-to-face with their community members. Their only option was to reorganize and digitalize the entire work system. The temporary solution was the creation of several initiatives to cope with the crisis and its impacts. One of the initiatives was the campaign called “Viral Resistance”, which shared information on operations by their organization, such as remote assistance to the elderly, coping with loneliness and several other online activities (IFSNetwork, 2020b.).

According to the World Health Organisation, there have been 3,994,894 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 120,256 deaths reported in Italy between January 2020 and April 2021. Despite the arrival of the vaccines and COVID-19 numbers falling in some parts of the world, most community and neighbourhood houses are still not fully active to help reduce contamination cases. And most of the services are functioning remotely with the help of digital communication tools and social media networks.

## 4 Empirical Research

This paper aims to examine how different IFS Network members, such as federations and a few local organizations, use social media as part of their communications operations and explore the challenges faced in external communication during the pandemic. This research is interested in finding the place, role, and need for social media and platforms in community work in general and focusing on how the IFS Network members use it in their external communication activities. It also aims at discovering the communication teams' needs and requirements for effective utilization of social media as some of the most prominent and fast communication tools of this century.

In this thesis, the author defined the study's primary objective as;

"How do the IFS Network members use social media platforms, some of the most leading and fast communications tool of the century? At the same time, the author is also searching for answers to the following questions:

- Are social media networks necessary to non-profits or community work?
- Do IFS Network communication teams need social media platforms to reach their external and large audiences in normal circumstances and during a crisis?
- Are IFS Networks communications teams well prepared and equipped to use social media platforms effectively?

Finding answers to these questions brought the author to research and analyzed the IFS Network social media operations at the federations and individual member organization's level.

### 4.1 Qualitative approach

Qualitative methods were applied to collect data for this research, and empirical research applied as the author of this thesis had the chance to do an observational visit to some of the communication teams of the IFS Network members for a certain period and before the research the start of the thesis project. Additionally, the author conducted an online interview with communication representatives.

The author opted for the empirical research as the conclusions or answers were expected to be verifiable, observed, and experienced evidence. Also, Empirical research involves

methodical collection and analysis and is increasingly used in qualitative research. Most communication studies use empirical research to collect data communication studies to produce consistent and objective data (Dan, 2017). Qualitative research data used in this thesis are illustrated in figure 4.



Figure 4. Sources of Qualitative Data (Center for Research Quality 2015)

Qualitative approach was the chosen research method for this study as it focuses on generating meaning and understanding through the detailed description and use of words. Contrarily to quantitative research, it addresses different problems, arises from different philosophical views, uses different methods and designs, achieves different goals, and focuses on the meaning and quality of the experience and tries to describe or understand the essence or nature of human experience. Qualitative research strives to understand, describe, and discover.

The main reason for choosing qualitative for this paper was that it is flexible, emergent, and evolving design characteristics as the part of data collection happened during the challenging times of social distancing and coronavirus restrictions globally. It is essential to mention that qualitative research in no way suggests that it is less disciplined, easier to design or implement. Being part of the communication teams of the commissioning organization, the author of this thesis acted as the primary instrument bringing her perspective to the selection of data.

Qualitative research aims to explore, describe, and interpret. In this research, the data were carefully collected to understand the situation through exploration, description, and interpretation. As mentioned above, a big part of the data collection for this paper was made possible during the pandemic. Therefore, scheduling, planning, and collecting data may have been tricky to put in a specific time frame. For all the reasons and circumstances above, the author is content and convinced that qualitative research was the most appropriate and suitable approach for this research.

## 4.2 Target group

The target group of this research are IFS Networks member organizations, communications representatives located in different countries and continents. These representatives work in communication teams and are part of the individual organisations or federations. Depending on the locations, most of the IFS Networks federations represent many neighbourhood settlements and serve people from all walks of life. For example, the United Neighbourhood Houses of New York (UNH), with 44 settlement houses, serve 765 000 New Yorkers. The targeted communications representatives faced the health crisis and witnessed the communications challenges that came with it.

One of the aims of this study was to have these communications representatives' opinions and feelings on the entire situation and phenomenon, focusing on the means and training provided for the development of social media use in their work. It was important to include some of the individual organizations' communication representatives, including those who do not use social media platforms at all in this target group, to have their experience included in this research.

## 4.3 Data gathering

Data gathering to answer the research questions happen through interviews with a focus group, observations through study visits at some of the target group's communication teams. It took place between October 2020 and March 2021 due to the health crisis. The first interview questions were used in a meeting with the target group. In a group discussion, the participants were asked open-ended questions to best elaborate their opinions. The first interview led to the creation of another interview questions sent to the target group through Forms. As a member of the IFS Network's communication team, the thesis author had the chance to do observational visits to some of the target group's teams to better grasp the environments without affecting them. The data for this research is collected from federations and individual member organizations from Africa, America, Oceania, and Europe. This ensured accuracy and representativeness of different members of the IFS Network in the research. The interview's recipients are from 4 Federations and three local organizations, considering that one federation may represent up to 45 or 50 member organizations and serve thousands of people in communities.

The author used some of Creswell's strategies (2007) to ensure this research validity; an extended engagement and persistent data gathering to avoid drawing a conclusion based on an isolated experience with the subject. Multiple data sources helped to have a complete

picture of the phenomenon. All collected data were presented as initially gathered to avoid the researcher's biases that could inevitably alter the study's conclusion. A peer debriefing of the findings helped to review the findings. An external person not familiar with the study helped review the study for overall coherence, consistency, and logic. In the interview questions on Google Forms, the participants were assured that their organizations' identity would remain private, and the information provided will be solely used for research purposes.

The research method used in this thesis is the qualitative approach. Mainly for its constructivism and interpretivism characteristics. This approach integrates subjective human experiences. The goal is to explore, discover, describe, and interpret findings from the theoretical framework of the thesis. This combination of the method allowed the author to understand better how the IFS Network members integrate online communication and social media in their communications strategies. The approach also helps in detecting different areas to improve and apply best practices.

#### **4.4 Data analysis process**

The data analysis process for this research started after the last interview was conducted. The data analysis process for the research was a significant step in making sense of the information or data collected. A qualitative approach was applied for this study. Qualitative data is a series of steps or iterative process of a group or individual review and interpretation to generate outcome and a rich analysis. In this part of the paper, the thesis author breaks the data into meaningful part to make sense of the whole. The data is read and re-read in very close detail. The researcher interrogated and summarized the data and pulled the connections across it to use the data to answer the questions in chapter 4 of this thesis. The author read the transcripts of the interview several times, did constant comparison and interpretation.

Once transcribed, the data was put into codes, analyzed, interpreted, and verified. This process helped the researcher in better understanding from repeatedly reading the transcripts from the interviews. The codes are sentences, phrases, keywords, or chunks of data used to organize texts and are significant to the qualitative research. All the data are placed into a category. The results are in a range of themes; Ordinary themes, hard-to-classify themes, unexpected themes, major and sub-themes. The researcher labelled the categories and decided which are the most relevant and how they are connected. At the final stage, the researcher constructed a narrative that describes the connections between the categories. The narrative is the description of themes, sub-themes, quotes, and codes for the interviews to support her ideas and discuss the interrelations of the whole. The categories and their connections are the main results of this study. It is the core of all study.

To ensure the ethics of this researcher, the researcher submitted a research proposal and plan to the supervisor. The participants in the interview were informed of the research project and consented to participate. The researcher ensured interviews participants of confidentiality and anonymity during the process.

Most limitations encountered during the research are due to the coronavirus pandemic and the fact that participants were from different countries and continent. For this reason, the researcher opted for semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions to have a more extensive representation of communication teams at different levels. Another limitation was that the lapse between interviews—the researcher remediated by conducting an updated interview before the analysis process. The researcher was aware of the researcher bias and was vigilant. Even though it is challenging to eliminate biases, the researcher is confident about the validity of the findings.

This chapter discussed the methodology approach applied in the research. It outlined the method used for data collection, the research questions, the data analysis process, the ethical considerations, and the study's limitations.

## 5 Results and data analysis

This chapter will provide the main themes and present the findings from the interview process and analysis. The participants in this research are communications representatives and other representatives of the IFS Network internal members. The following key themes emerged from the data analysis regarding the necessity for social media as a communication means, social media presence, social media presence as an external communication medium, effectiveness and efficiency in social media usage, and improvement. All these themes are interconnected. The data analysis emerged that most of the IFS Network federations are actively present online. There is a need for developing social media strategies to reach and engage with intended audiences efficiently and effectively.

According to the research questions' structure presented in the empirical part chapter, the analysis covers three sub-sections. The first interview questions were focused on the member organisations use of social media in general and the second researched the use of social media networks as an external communication channel.

Most of the respondents were from the federations and a small number of individual members were included in the interviews. Here are the first interview and online meeting questions:

- What kind of communication means in social media (tools included) do you use?
- what are the social media platforms that you use? Which frequency?
- What do you use them for? Marketing, work visibility or promotion?
- Why do you use (have chosen) them?
- How many users do you serve?
- How many people do you reach? per day/week/month/year?
- What are the limitations? – where?
- How would you rate your use of social media?
- Is there a plan to improve those means in the future? – social media?
- How to improve/support communication at the international level?

The findings from the first interview show that the interviewed federations and their audiences are most active online. The findings suggest that developing the IFS member organisations' social media strategies could be an effective way to reach the federations intended audiences. The interviews indicated that Facebook is the social media platform federations use frequently to communicate with their targeted audiences, with an average of 8 posts per week. Facebook also had the highest average following among federations, with an average of 2,900 followers per federation. Twitter was mentioned as an additional social

media channel used, but with a low frequency of posts as well as limited engagement, which suggest that the IFS core audiences are not active on this platform.

Data regarding the use of LinkedIn was only provided by 2 federations but shows a promising future for the IFS on this channel. Two of the federations interviewed have an average of 1,558 followers on LinkedIn. The IFS has the potential to quickly grow its following on this networking site. However, LinkedIn's features rely mainly on sharing or commenting on content, so there is a limited opportunity for community development. As a result, Facebook should remain the focus of the IFS' social media efforts.

The findings also indicated that the IFS member organizations could benefit from using social media in marketing, promotion, visibility, branding, and engagement on a larger scale. All the participants expressed the need to learn and to develop their skills in social media. However, the lack of time, capacity, staff, and tight budget does not permit improving and creating meaningful and quality content and new platforms. Communication representatives wish to have a platform to share news, best practices, connect and engage with targeted audiences, and support communication internationally.

Communication representatives wish to have a platform to share news, best practices, connect and engage with targeted audiences, and support communication internationally. One of the participants shared about starting to tag partners in key messages and getting more strategic in using hashtags to open a greater connection and improve international exposure and support.

The second interview concentrated on studying the use of social media as an external communication tool. In this second part of the interviews, the researcher used the same methods, techniques, focus group, keywords, and the main questions in chapter 4.

However, this time around, the individual organizations are represented. One of the representatives who works on a project exclusively based on social media and another one whose organization is not on social media participated in the interview on Google Forms.

This analysis is done based on the answers provided on the interview questions shared on Google Forms related to the theory presented in chapter 2. The qualitative interview was filled by two federations representatives and three representatives from individual organizations. The interview was anonymous and to be answered truthfully.

Some of the questions asked in the second interview were like the ones in the first. Therefore, the researcher chose to present here only the new findings.



The graph in figure 5 illustrates the external communication channels used to connect with members within and outside the organization.

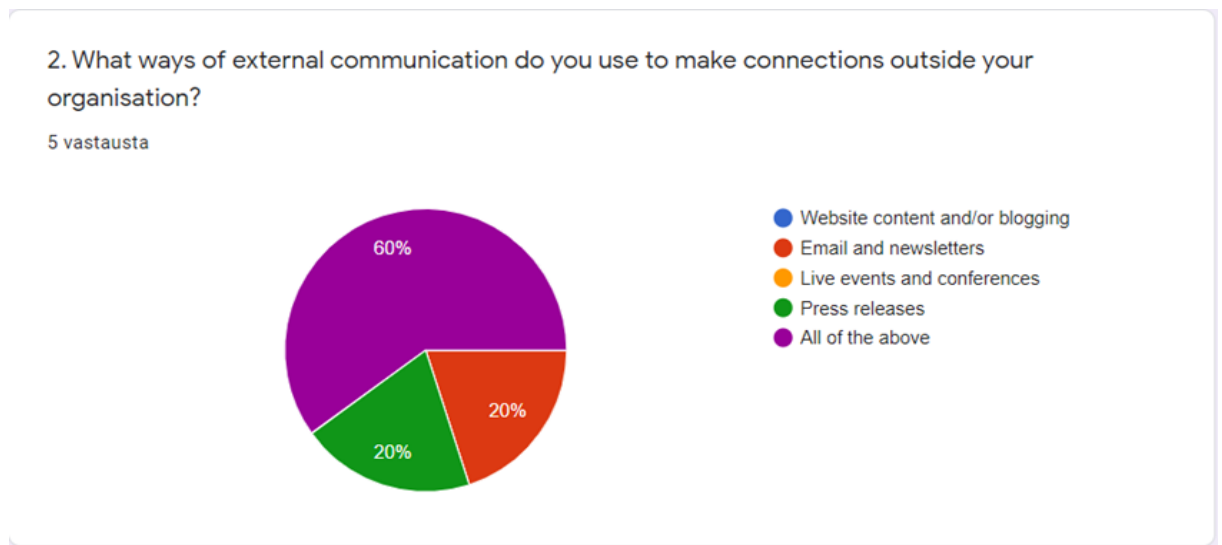


Figure 5: External communication channels used

The previous findings showed that IFS member organizations' external communication target audiences are board members, funders, founders, prospective funders, state/city contracts funders, corporate partners/prospective corporate partners, individual donors, elected officials, member settlement houses, partner organizations, coalition partners, IFS community, community organizations, youth, seniors, young adults, journalists, volunteers, stakeholders, governments, and other beneficiaries. As shown in figure 5 60% uses websites content to communicate with the external audiences; 20% use mostly emails, newsletters, and 20% press releases, while 60% use a combination of different communication medium.

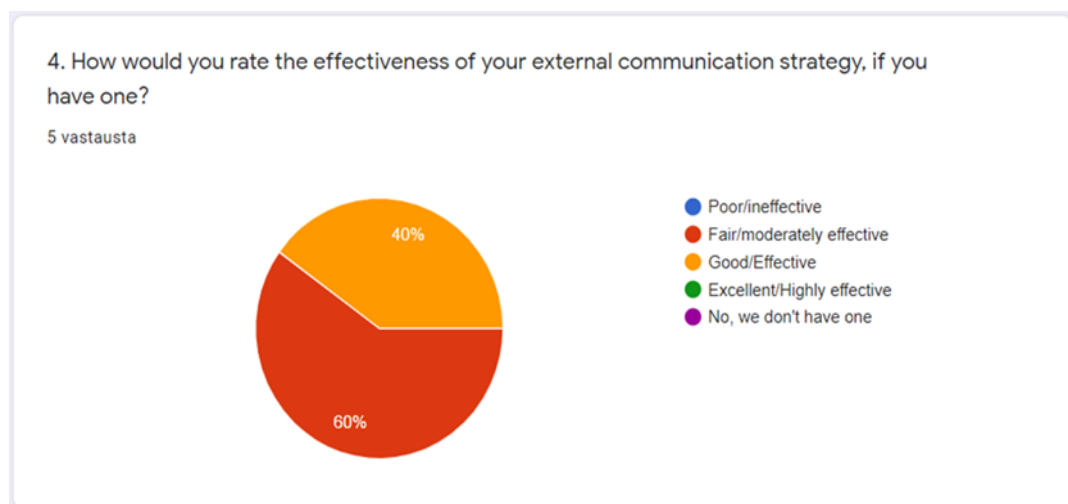


Figure 6: The effectiveness of external communication strategy

The graph in figure 6 illustrates the effectiveness of external communication strategies. 60% of the recipients think that their external communication strategies are moderately effective or fair. Only 40% of them are confident that their strategies are effective.

The previous findings showed that most of the organizations and federations an external communication strategy that includes social media. However, social media platforms mainly focus on communicating about events, actions, and other activities. The exception was one of the individual organizations that is not on social media at all. According to their representative, the main reason for not being on social media is the misuse that it generates, fake news, bad language, and the psychological abuse that often appear online. Those who use social media said that their strategy needed improvement.

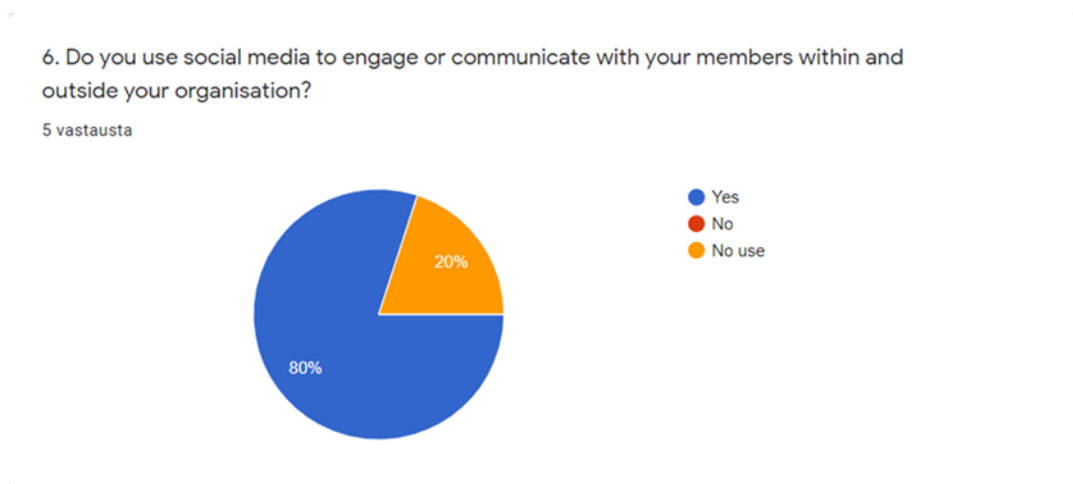


Figure 7: Social media platforms as a communication medium

The external communication channels used by the IFS members are newsletters, social media platforms, emails, website, media coverage, rallies and live events, fundraising events, press releases and booklets (figure 5). One individual organization is not on social media. The graph in figure 7 shows that 80% of members are active on social media, communicate and engage with members within and outside their organizations. 20% don't use social media.

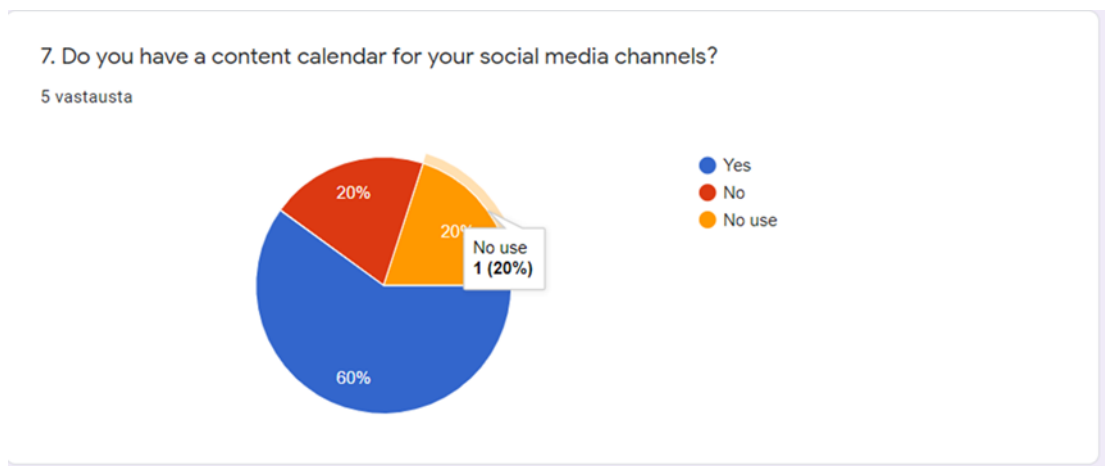


Figure 8: Content calendar for social media

80% of the communications teams have a social media content calendar., while 20% do not have or need one as shown in figure 8.

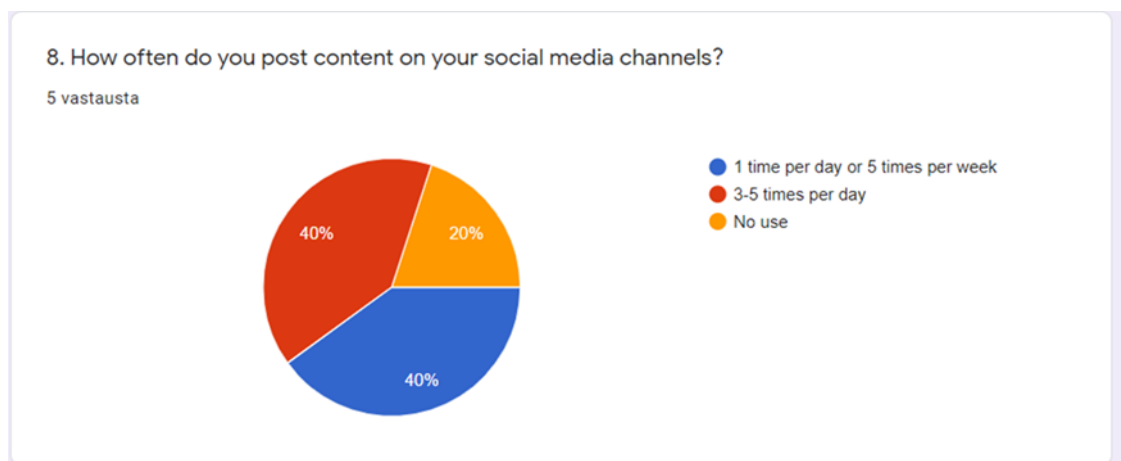


Figure 9: Social media posts frequency.

The illustration in figure 9 shows the frequency of post or content release on social media platforms. 40% posts content 1-5 times a week, another 40% posts 3-5 times a week. And 20% are not on social media.

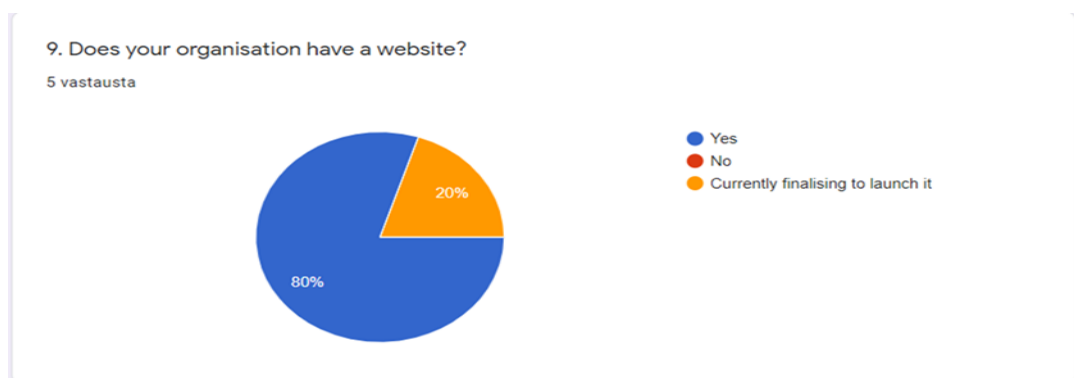


Figure 10: Website

The illustration on figure 10 shows that 80% of the federations and individual members have an active website. And 20% is launching theirs.

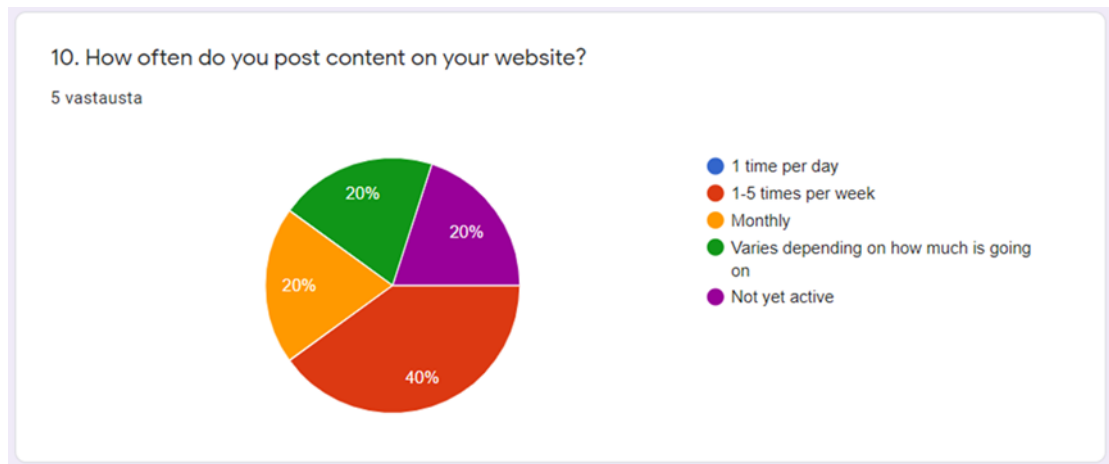


Figure 11. Website content post frequency

Figure 11 indicates that 40% of member organizations post content on their websites 1-5 times per week. 20% post content depending on the activities or situations. Another 20% post monthly and 20% do not yet have a website.

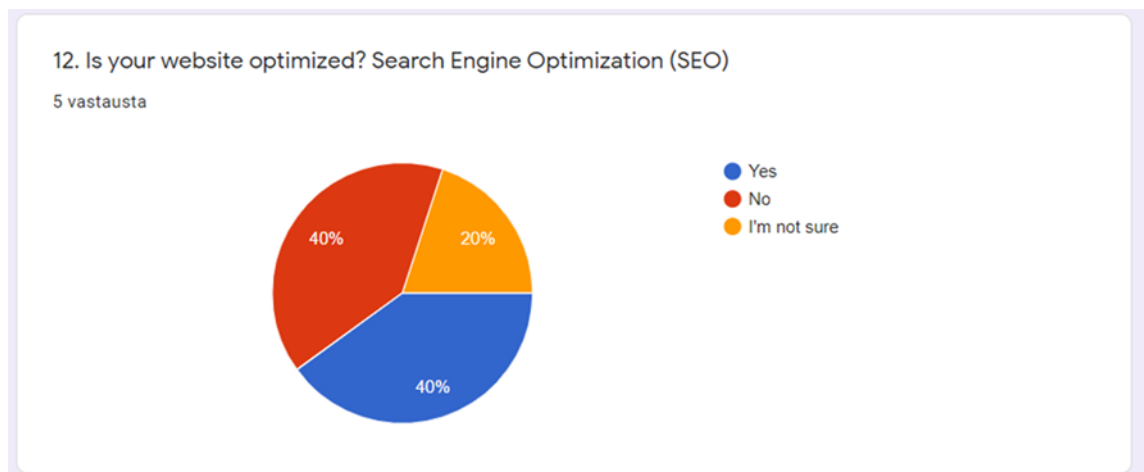


Figure12. Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

The member organizations with websites link them to all their external channels, email signatures, Facebook, websites' URL, communication tools or weekly newsletters. That is how they attract traffic to the websites. 40% of the member organizations have optimized search engine on their website, another 40% do not use it all, and is not sure about using it (Figure 12). SEO help to improve the quality and quantity of a website's traffic from search engines with specific keywords.

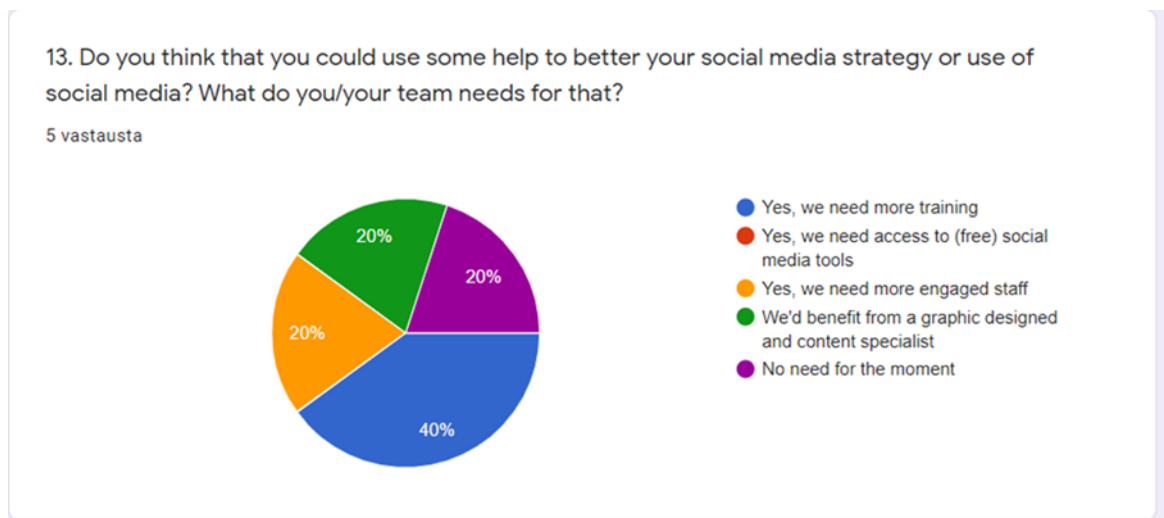


Figure13. Need for training and skills development

40% of communication representatives said that there is room for growth and need for training, and 20% indicated that they need more staff to help build effective and efficient social media strategies. 20% of the communication representatives said that they need to learn illustrative graphics and use a content specialist in their team. The last 20% of the participants did not need it for the moment.

The purpose of this chapter was to highlight the findings that emerged from the interview carried on Google Forms. The findings show that external communication has a significant role in communicating with people outside the organization. Most of the IFS members are using social media platforms to reach targeted audiences (Figure 5). the findings on the effectiveness of external communication strategies indicated that some organizations and federations already have an external communication strategy that includes social media. The effectiveness of strategies was rated moderately effective for the majority and good for the rest of the organizations (question 4, figure 6). 4 out of the 5 participants in the interview reported that their organizations own a website that uses an optimized research engine. However, some of them did not know if it used at all.

To The question about how member organizations attract traffic on their websites, those who have websites reported that they link it to all their external channels, email signatures, links on newsletters taking the websites and via Facebook. Most of the interviewees wished for more staff, time, and training to produce quality and meaningful content for their targeted audiences. Interestingly, one of the organizations does not use social media and is not planning to use it. Some of the organizations use social media but not as an external communication channel.

## 6 Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an interpretation of the findings from the collected data and give recommendations for recommendations on some of the ways social media could be beneficial in times of crisis, daily communication activities and further research.

### 6.1 Key findings

This research aimed to investigate how different IFS Network members, such as federations and local organizations, use social media as part of their communications activities and as one of the primary communication tools of this century. The researcher also focused on using social media to communicate and connect with people outside of the organizations. This research project started a few months before the spread of the coronavirus and its impact on communication everywhere. For that reason, the researcher felt the need to consider the disruption caused by the health crisis in communication.

The findings indicate that most of the IFS Networks member organizations, federations and individual organizations included have a presence on social media. Some are very active with effective social media strategies; others are reasonably more or less present, struggling with finding an engaged staff and time to concentrate on social media activities. In contrast, one of the local organizations present in the research is not interested in integrating this communication tool in their activities. The reason is to stay away from the pros of using social media. The social media platform of choice for most of the participants is Facebook.

One of the participants in this research was also a local organization whose project is based on social media entirely. One of the project's coordinators who participated in the interviews gave her permission to cite the project's name and talk about it in this research. The project "Just for you on Social Media" is founded to reduce sexual harassment, maltreatment and bullying on social media and provide support to the adolescents who are victims. The project is a phase of youth work and outreach youth work on social media.

Their goal is to be present on social media and make it a safe place for all, mainly children who are the most vulnerable in this phenomenon. The project's team does outreach, post educational content, train professionals and youth workers, and respond to youth's questions on Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok every day from 9-20. One of the project coordinators, Reetta Hänninen, reported that: "The project started during the pandemic has surpassed the expectations. We started with 80 contact requests from the youth aged 12-21 in Spring 2020. The number of requests has climbed to more than 400 requests from youth aged 8-21. Most of those youngsters are on TikTok and Snapchat. The young people are

very involved in the project". When asked about the secret behind the success, Ms Hänninen replied that they were well prepared and started with a solid social media strategy.

Their strategic communication, effort and time helped achieve their goals and more. The "For You on Social Media" project is based in Finland.

The combination of qualitative research interviews findings shows that the pandemic did bring challenges in communication. The communication teams managed to do the digital jump without many struggles. However, communicating with larger audiences such as in conferences, annual or general meetings was challenging. A handful of members expressed the need for training and time to improve their presence and develop skills on social media.

## **6.2 Recommendations for IFS members' communication teams**

This subchapter focuses on the researcher's recommendations based on the findings of the research. Organizations that are active on social media and have strategies need to revise how they utilize social media. Instead of sharing news and activities only, they could use social media networks to post issue-centered content to create leadership in their focused areas. The following recommendation will include those who are already active on social media, those who are planning to improve, and those who use social media to achieve their online goals.

The communication teams are recommended to following steps to achieve successful results with their online presence or social media presence. The first step is analyzing the current situation using some of the digital marketing strategy planning models such as SOSTAC. The SOSTAC planning system is a simple and easy to use digital marketing planning guide used to plan digital marketing or overall marketing strategy or improving individual channel tactics. The planning model was developed by PR Smith, co-author of Emarketing Excellence (PR Smith, 2020.). SOSTAC will help in analyzing the 6 things and stands for:

- Situation - where you are now (weaknesses, opportunities, strength, results)
- Objectives - where you want to be – missions - values
- Strategy - how to get there - gives directions for all the tactics
- Tactics - how exactly to get there - how to ensures that the plan executed with excellency
- Action - what is the plan
- Control - monitor performance - metrics how to measure the objectives

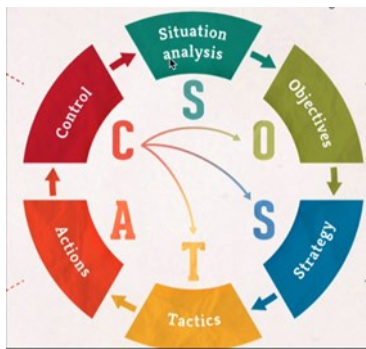


Figure 15. SOSTAC Planning (PR Smith 2020)

The SOSTAC model can be applied to the core aspects of the organizations' digital, business, marketing, project plans to name a few, following a logical order to tackle the plan or strategy. The situation analysis could be implemented by analyzing the current performance, consumer analysis, opportunities, and competitor analysis.

The analysis in case of social media could include assessing the used social media platforms performance, for example, Facebook. The recommended tools for social networks and websites performance or overview are Woorank or Likealyzer.

Another recommendation is to search and compare with competitors' organizations. In this case, it could be organizations who work for social justice or community's empowerment.

The author recommends using a simple social media strategy for a successful online presence. The recommended strategy has four elements: Research, content, promotion, and measurement.

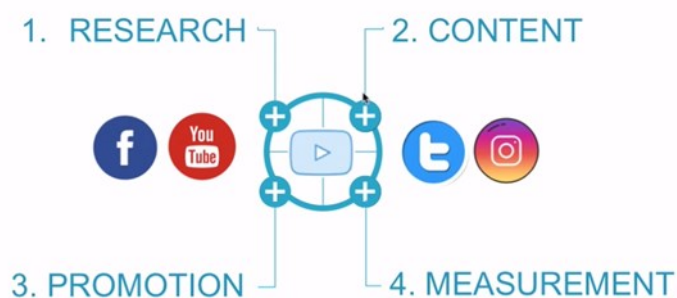


Figure 14. simple social media strategy elements (Lasse Rouhianen 2015)

The Research element is about analyzing the trends, target audience and competition. Creating meaningful content such as videos, articles, or any other forms of content. Promotion goes with the way to interact with different audiences and the choice of platforms. Measurement is the analyze of the results (Figure14).



The last recommendation in this subchapter is the use of a content calendar. Those templates can be downloaded online. The content calendar will help in structuring and planning the content to be posted online. Creating a crisis communication for social media is highly recommended as well.

### **6.3 Recommendations for further research**

This subchapter will serve as a continuity of recommendations from the previous subchapter's recommendations. This subchapter focuses on the proposals for a thorough study to support the original objective of the study. It is crucial to conduct more studies and surveys from federations located in areas where the IFS currently lacks much membership, like South America, Asia, and Africa. Additionally, a survey developed for local organizations may be helpful for a thorough understanding of the social media practices of smaller organizations.

The following crucial study to conduct should be Facebook and LinkedIn engagement from federations to understand better the potential digital reach of the IFS. The most significant part of this research was conducted in the middle of the health crisis. Another study should concentrate on the usage of digital communication during the pandemic and preparedness for future practices in times of crisis.

Due to the challenging times and sudden changes, the original idea to conduct broad research that includes all IFS members communication teams became challenging as everyone was busy trying to adapt to "the new normal". The study lacked representatives as only 4 IFS federations were included in the research out of 7 federations and only a few local organizations among many IFS local organizations worldwide. Further research needs to involve all the IFS members communication teams.

### **6.4 Reflection on Learning**

The researcher in this study is a member of the IFS Network, and this study was done with passion and a big hope to help develop communication for the IFS Office in Finland and its members worldwide. Hence, the positive self-assessment of this thesis. Being part of the IFS Network communication was a plus for the author since it helped gather communication representatives during a difficult time and still manage to get insight and valuable information in this study.

The research process was a great learning opportunity for the author, who is highly interested in digital communication for Non-profits organizations. Thanks to this research, the

author has been able to have hands-on experience and expanded the knowledge acquired during her academic specialization.

The research outcome is an excellent asset to the preparedness and development in digital communication for the commissioning company now and in the days to come. The author has broadened knowledge into the field of digital communication, non-profits communications and crisis communication. It has provided the author with valuable information for her professional and studies career in the future.

The main challenges encountered during this thesis process was timing and time management. As an adult student, mother, and working for two organizations, managing personal life, studies, and work was quite challenging but rewarding at the same time.

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## Appendix

The necessity for social media in the development of external communication skills: The case of The International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centers (IFS).

Thank you for taking part in this crucial research that we hope will help the IFS communications teams develop effective ways to reach, connect, interact and remain in contact with their members. My name is Junias Kanyinda, communications manager at the IFS Helsinki Office and a third-year BBA student majoring in Organisational Communication at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Finland.

I am doing this research as part of my thesis, but the main objective is to examine how the IFS members use social media channels in community work. The pandemic's sudden arrival forced most neighbourhood and community houses to close their bumping spaces and switch most services from face-to-face to online, thus the need to adapt to the new normal. The survey consists of 13 questions and takes approximately 5 minutes to complete. All the data gathered will remain anonymous, and no members will be identifiable in the research. The data collected from this survey will be protected and stored by the IFS Office.

It will be solely used for scholarly purposes to improve the IFS and members communications and may be shared with Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences representatives.

Please contact me by email if you have any questions about the survey:

[junias.kanyinda@settlementti.fi](mailto:junias.kanyinda@settlementti.fi)

1. What are your organisation's external communications' target audiences? \*

\*

2. What ways of external communication do you use to make connections outside your organisation? \*

☐ Website content and/or blogging

☐ Email and newsletters

☐ Live events and conferences

☐ Press re-

☐ leases All

☐ of the

above

Other:

3. Do you have an external communication strategy? If yes, does it include social media? If no why? \*

4. How would you rate the effectiveness of your external communication strategy, if you have one? \*

☐ Poor/ineffective

☐ Fair/moderately effective

☐ Good/Effective

☐ Excellent/Highly effective

☐ No, we don't have one

☐ Other:

5. What are your external communication channels? \*

6. Do you use social media to engage or communicate with your members within and outside your organisation? \*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other:

7. Do you have a content calendar for your social media channels? \*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other:

8. How often do you post content on your social media channels? \*

- ☐ 1 time per day or 5 times per week
- ☐ 3-5 times per day
- ☐ Other:
- 

9. Does your organisation have a website? \*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other:

10. How often do you post content on your website? \*

- ☐ 1 time per
- ☐ day 1-5
- ☐ times per
- week
- Other:

11. How do you attract traffic or get people to visit your website? \*

---

12. Is your website optimized? Search Engine Optimization (SEO) \*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other:

13. Do you think that you could use some help to better your social media strategy or use of social media? What do you/your team need for that? \*

- ☐ Yes, we need more training
- ☐ Yes, we need access to (free) social media tools
- ☐ Yes, we need more engaged
- ☐ staff

Other:

**Google** Forms