



British Embassy
Prague



Harnessing the power of digital communication: a guide for civil society

February 2021

*This paper has been produced
with the generous support of
the **British Embassy Prague***



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WHO WE ARE

The International Sustainable Finance Centre (ISFC) is an independent, apolitical and impact-driven non-profit organisation whose aim is to carry out in-depth research on sustainable finance topics. The Centre uses expert insight and practical policy solutions to inform public debate and policymaking on sustainable finance, while also helping to build local expertise, networks and capacity on key topics, which include the EU's Green Deal, its Sustainable Finance Agenda and its post-COVID19 recovery packages.

INTRODUCTION

The global COVID-19 outbreak affected every part of our society across all sectors. Inevitably, this leads to implications for civil society as well. The pandemic has caused us to experience a prompt activation of uniting factors within civil society. These catalysts have increased solidarity in the face of new challenges such as financial struggles, future anxiety, and a global shift to online labour and communications.

Since the spring of 2020, the virus has dominated headlines around the world, becoming the main focus of almost all mainstream media, and the number one reported topic globally. As a result, it has been more challenging for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to make themselves heard. A lot of civil society's activities and messaging have been "under lockdown" – or they have found themselves adding to the COVID noise in a bid to be heard. This paper aims to provide a practical guide for improved communication strategies for civil society organisations, linking research with practice to help these organisations maximise their digital outreach. It focuses on how to craft engaging messages and disseminate them among a professional journalist audience for maximum impact, at a time when your messaging will be competing with almost blanket coverage of a single, dominating topic.

ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN CENTRAL EUROPE



Over the past three decades, civil society in Central Europe has experienced various transformations. From the initial cheerfulness and civic participation to state-animating and sometimes even controlled organizations (GONGOs), the dominance and favourable public opinion of CSOs has slowly shifted. Worsening relations between the civil society, governments and publics, has led researchers to start referring to the shrinking of civil society in Central Europe. While some organizations are exiting, others have embraced the recent challenges and adapted to the changing dynamics.

A significant part of this adaptation is rethinking communication strategies towards stakeholders and the media. To sustain their activities, civil society organisations have professionalized their communications by hiring public relations experts, building long-term relationships with journalists and incorporating new communication channels such as social media into their communication mix. Carefully, they are now balancing different communication streams with politicians, journalists and citizens. This professionalisation is sometimes confused with widely criticised marketisation of the sector.

Professionalized strategic communication should be viewed as an opportunity for organisations to engage with their audiences and achieve greater impact. If approached correctly, it becomes a tool for reputation and trust building rather than a risk or a threat to it.



COMMUNICATING CHANGE AND PUBLIC POLICIES

Some topics that civil society organisations tackle are often viewed as too abstract or complex for the mainstream audiences. One such area of research that continues to remain controversial is climate change. While environmental debates have gained momentum in recent years, citizens are experiencing various concerns and socio-economic dilemmas. Short-term individual benefits within the natural resource industry are continually conflicted with long-term collective goals of environmental preservation. The social conflict (individual versus the collective) battles the temporal conflict (immediate versus delayed consequences). This issue is further complicated by distant impacts of climate change, insulation of modern citizens from the environment, delayed or absent gratification for acting, the complexity of the issue and uncertainty it brings ([Moser, 2010](#)).

In summary, the problem is perceived as eventually inevitable, unsolvable and distant, and organizations are struggling with the task to engage and educate audiences to inspire to action and preservation. Similarly, informative or educational work on topical policies, such as the Green Recovery or Just Transition, does not always reach the intended audience due to a lack of understanding that these organisations are critical to informing the public on climate change. Abstract policy work is often difficult to relate to.

Communicating these issues are often results in the message being riddled with invisible causes and distant impacts that remain too unrelatable to an average citizen.

A body of academic research has focused on addressing these communication problems and on increasing the effectiveness and impacts of the messaging. [Spence and Pidgeon \(2010\)](#), for example, investigated the framing of climate change in media. Framing is an interdisciplinary concept of storylines that “set a specific train of thought in motion, communicating why an issue might be problem, who or what might be responsible for it, and what should be done about it” ([Nisbet, 2010](#)). It breaks down a complex issue into one simple, interesting and persuasive narrative. As Nisbet adds, it an unavoidable reality of the modern communication, especially in the realm of public affairs and public policy. Going back to the Spence and Pidgeon study on climate change framing, their results indicate that **gain frames were superior to loss frames – gain frames referring to an emphasis of benefits, and loss frames relating to disadvantages or negative aspects**. The use of gain frames resulted in increasing positive attitudes towards climate change action and in the perceived severity of the problem. This finding implies that stressing the benefits of tackling climate change, such as clean air, leaves a bigger impact than stressing the losses it brings.

Utilizing scientific research (on issue framing, for example), can alter recipients' attitudes towards the problem.

Techniques like this are equally effective and important in attracting media attention.

Though shaping the messaging based on scientific research is impactful and a change of narrative leads to behaviour change in audiences, both are time-consuming and require expertise in persuasive communication. In an ideal world, it's not the organisations pushing their topic to the stakeholders but the stakeholders actively participating in a two-way communication with the organisation, while seeking information voluntarily themselves. Social media is particularly powerful in connecting likeminded individuals, providing a resource for communities' organisation and coordination ([Wilson & Peterson, 2002](#)). It is also a tool of public relations that is financially accessible to any organisation with wide audience impact. Since everyone is listening, organisations must be extra mindful of what they share online. Mixed messaging, trigger words, or insensitive outlooks can result in a major blunder that can harm a movement.

A great example of an organisation with smart and effective communication is the non-profit financial think-tank [Carbon Tracker Initiative](#), which provides analysis of the fossil fuel industry, exploring the financial risk arising from stranded assets or unburnable coal. It engages with various companies, investors, market players, regulators and the media through different communication channels. In its communication, Carbon Tracker focuses on reframing the climate debate using terms that resonate with the financial markets and other stakeholders. Instead of using general term “climate risk”, the think-tank used terminology to highlight the seriousness of the problem. These include “unburnable carbon”, “wasted capital”, “stranded assets” and “fossil fuel risk premium”; terms that resonate with the audiences and adhere to media logic. Moreover, the Carbon Tracker Initiative uses informative graphs to support the worrisome but factual statements about the fossil fuel industry, which is often graphically depicted by the think-tank as a bubble about to burst.

This strategy led to influential articles quoting Carbon Tracker in well-known newspapers, such as The Financial Times, The Economist and The New York Times. The think-tank monitors its social media and media outreach and includes the numbers in its yearly report to show the successful results in engaging stakeholders in environmental debate online.

Media houses and journalists adhere to certain rules in transmitting and communicating information. Understanding these unwritten rules is important in any communication strategy. The main rules include providing actual, new and concrete information within a story. In relation to the social media logic, [van Dijck and Poell \(2013\)](#), consider four grounding principles – programmability, popularity, connectivity and datafication. The first principle, **programmability**, represents the invisible algorithms behind every platform. Those are very hard to analyse and “crack” since they are often part of the secret “know-how” of the platform owners. It is not clear how Facebook or Twitter lines Tweets in user’s feed. However, there are some techniques known to improve reach and visibility of content online, such as SEO in browser search.

The second principle is **popularity**, which includes socioeconomic components but is also closely related to the programmability mentioned. Trending topics on Twitter will gather even more attention – boosting certain topics or news or promoting tweets companies pay for. Moreover, as Dijck and Poell add: “In spite of the platform's egalitarian image, some people on Twitter are more influential than others, partly because the platform tends to be dominated by few users with large followings, partly because the platform assigns more weight to highly visible users. For instance, users such as CNN's Middle East correspondent Christiane Amanpour get more weight than other experts or witnesses” (p. 7). Getting these influencers share your messaging can significantly increase its reach. The third principle is **connectivity**.

Social media connects users and mutually shapes them through allowing formation of groups and communities as well as personalised recommendations. Creating a community around your mission or organisation is a long-term process but will be rewarded by having a loyal group of followers that are genuinely interested in your activities. The last principle of social media logic is **datafication**. Everything online is tracked and all social media platforms are constantly improving their predictive and analytics tools. These are available to profile owners for viewing and allow for gaining insights about followers’ demographics and behaviour. Learning the meaning behind this data can help your organisation tailor its messaging for wider impact.



COMMUNICATING WITH JOURNALISTS AND THE MEDIA

As we’ve reflected, the issues that CSOs seek to engage the public around are often complex and human attention is, of course, limited. Therefore, organisations should always tailor messaging to their specific audience and its needs. Every target audience must receive a message that they consider interesting, that speaks to them and makes them think about the issue in a way the organisation wants them to, following the golden rule in George Lakoff’s ‘Don’t Think of an Elephant’: “Thinking differently requires speaking differently”. In this book, Lakoff explains how everything in our world is framed. We build mental structures around our experiences, and these then shape our new experiences in return. The frames are activated through words and even through their negation. If we hear the word elephant, immediately, people cannot stop thinking of an elephant. However, the same happens when we are asked not to think of an elephant. Therefore, organisations utilising frames in their communication must develop their own frames to elicit a certain response when educating or discussing a certain public issue.

For example, instead of repeating the rhetoric of climate change deniers (which even in negation will still work in their favour), advocacy organisations should instead develop their own frames that are new for the audience. It is also important to be mindful of existing frames and avoid them if the connotations do not align with the organisation's mission. For example, the term "global warming" is associated with hoax frames ([Jang, Hart, 2015](#)). Any messaging framed as global warming might be immediately disregarded as a hoax by the recipients, consider using the term "climate change" instead. When the frames are prepared, it is time to get them to the right people: *journalists*.

Journalists are a powerful professional audience that can help spread a message nationally, or even internationally. However, this audience is also professionally sceptical, busy and under constant pressure from editors and readers to write the so-called "next big thing", or something that will drive online traffic to their story. Moreover, the environment they operate in is competitive. A great scientifically crafted message about the newest policies might simply not fit their needs. Instead, it is important to fully grasp the journalists' mindset, be conscious of the media zeitgeist and ensure that the messaging and subject matter you are offering meets that the journalist is interested in. We'll outline some examples of these tactics using the case of Just Transition and Green Recovery communication strategy.

THE CASE OF JUST TRANSITION AND GREEN RECOVERY

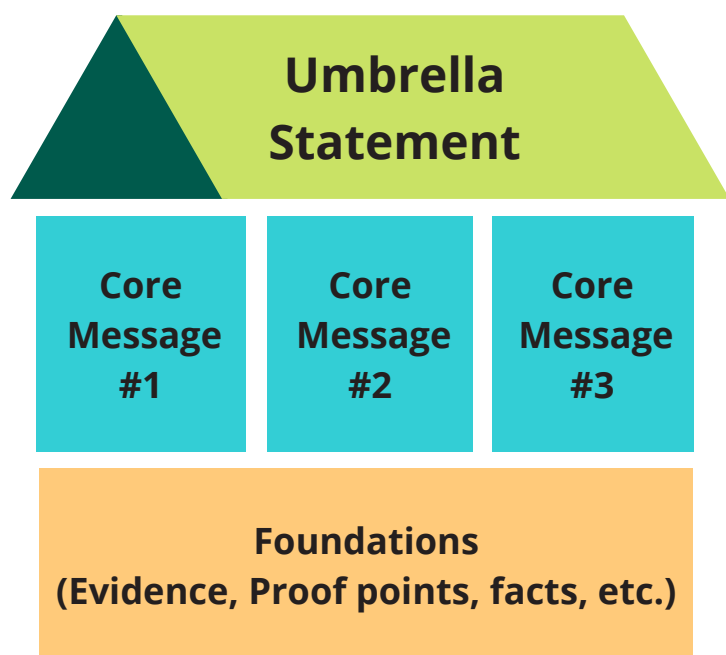


The most influential tool for attracting the attention of journalists is turning policies into stories. Setting an official digital strategy then ensures the message will get to the widest audience of journalists possible.

The essential need to explain policy can best be surmised in the lacklustre culmination of public interest for the newly enacted Green Deal. In 2019, the European Union (EU) introduced its Green Deal, addressing climate change through limiting greenhouse gas emissions and restoration and protection of biodiversity. Though the European Union has outlined concrete steps, timelines and resources for achieving its green objectives, **public awareness of the initiative remains low**. A survey by the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy reveals that, for example, only 30% of the Czechs had heard about the term "Green Deal" prior to the survey ([EUROPEUM, 2020, p.4](#)). Although broadly, many Czechs accept the climate is indeed changing (i.e., they subscribe the concept of climate change) and there is a consensus that it should be addressed soon, they lack understanding of the current actions and direction the EU is heading, due to the lack of media engagement with this topic.

CRAFTING THE MESSAGE

When preparing a message for journalists, it is important to have in mind a story "to sell" from the very beginning. Turning policy into a compelling and relatable story is key to getting the media attention needed. While people can be persuaded by facts and factual evidence, these need to be embedded in a coherent and easy-to understand narrative. For maximum impact, it also needs to have an emotional element that helps a person to relate to the issue. For example, anecdotes and relevant illustrating examples are memorable. A conventional approach to creating a memorable message and effectively communicating it on all communication channels is known as the **Message House**. The roof of this fictional house is the umbrella statement, followed by three core messages and lastly, the base is created by incorporating facts and numbers, anecdotes and examples in it. While a house would normally be built from the ground up, the Message House starts with the umbrella statement.



Message House model

- **Umbrella statement** – an overarching statement or take-away statement. This is the key message you want to land with your audience, for them to take on-board and remember. When creating the umbrella statement, the target audience, their needs, and concerns or potential criticism, all need to be considered.

In September 2020, the European Parliament and Council reached a provisional agreement on setting up the Just Transition Fund to mitigate social impact of greening the economy, promising up to €17.5 billion to support the affected regions. An exemplary umbrella statement for this news could therefore be: “A new deal sets up a Just Transition Fund to mitigate social impact of greening the economy” (see here). On its own, this message is very unlikely to catch the attention of an average citizen or journalist. Breaking the statement into more concrete messages, supported by engaging story-building elements, can tell a very different story.

- **Three core messages** - the main purpose of these messages is to support the umbrella statement and provide more details and context. It could be more than three, as long as the umbrella statement remains clear and intact.

In the given example about the Just Transition Fund deal, the communication officer has already broken the statement down into three bullet point messages:

- **Situation:** “17.5 billion EUR to support people, the economy and the environment for 2021-2027”.
 - **Problem:** “Investments in fossil fuels will not receive funding”.
 - **Solution:** “Focus on least developed regions, outermost regions, islands”
- Story building blocks – utilising facts/numbers, colour, quotes or an angle makes the core messages stand out. The story building blocks are what the journalists are often looking for – these need to be unique and memorable!

- **Facts** - providing evidence in form of number and data. Numbers should be put in context, for example showing trends or rates of change.
- **Colour** - translates to the human-interest element of the story. It frequently can set tone and backdrop for the narrative to be digestible for an audience.
- **Quotes** - quotes make any article better, but there are rules to follow. Your quote should be around 18 to 25 words at maximum (around two sentences). A great example is providing a metaphor, however, beware of cultural differences or clichés. In the case of the Just Transition Fund statement, an example is quoting Rapporteur Manolis Kefalogiannis (EPP, GR): “The European Parliament gave a strong political signal: the social, economic and environmental impact of the energy transition in the most affected regions must be addressed. We took a pragmatic approach that will allow us to move into a new green era without leaving anyone behind.” No one left behind is a memorable part of the quote with an emotional sentiment to it as well.
- **Angle** - a direction or narrative the story follows.

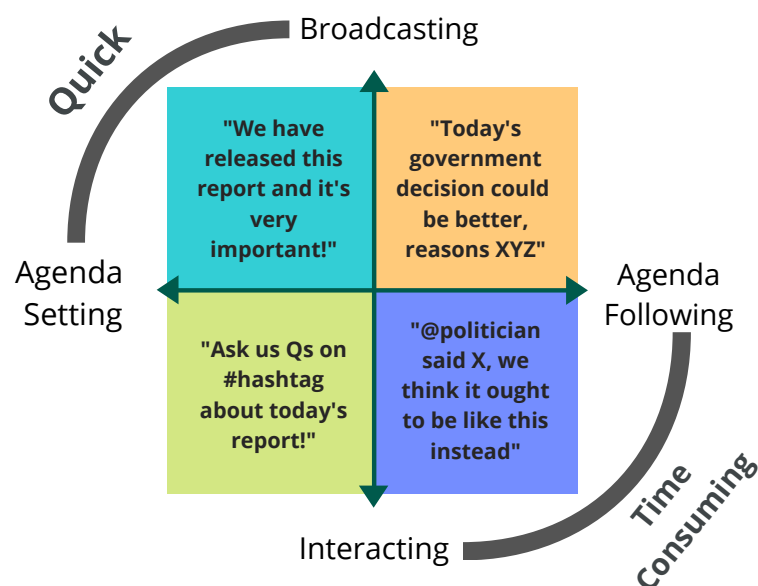
SPREADING THE MESSAGE

A well-crafted message can grab the attention of journalists, but how do you ensure it gets to the journalist in the first place? While reaching out to journalists with a press release through an e-mail is still a widely used practice, new digital trends can make communications with journalists faster. Due to the low barrier of entry for digital communications (anyone can send an email or a Tweet), it is worth spending time on crafting a media outreach strategy to 'cut through the noise' and to help your message stand from the many that journalists receive. Every interaction with the key journalists in your area needs to be well-through, in order that it is conducive to building credibility for the organisation and its, as a reliable source of commentary or information. This means using creative approaches to quotes, analysis and commentary.

Digital communication allows journalists to get latest news, commentary and quotes directly from the sources. **Twitter and LinkedIn** remain the most common platforms on which civil society organizations can engage with journalists and media professionals.

Twitter remains the principal network for political communication. These social networks have a great potential to build a community of interest around a specific topic quickly. However, to take advantage of Twitter, it is key to build an expert profile on Twitter, and to engage with the platform and its users regularly. To ensure future coverage of an organisation's work, it is crucial to **build a close working relationship with select journalists.** This takes time, but the strategy cements a professional relationship of trust, which ensures that the organisation has dependable allies in the journalist community.

The following graph depicts **the typography of political tweets reacting to a recent political decision.** The concurrent bullet points correspond to the quadrant model shown below.



Jon Worth, at ISFC & British Embassy Prague - webinar on Communications & Strategy training for the Post-COVID19 times

Imagine a think tank or an organization has a tweet to share with journalists and other followers regarding a current political issue. How can these tweets differ and how are they effective?

Twitter:

- Tweets that would be utilized between the **Broadcasting** and **Agenda-Setting** quadrants are quick to produce and easy to manage. At a pre-planned moment, the organisation shares the basic news about a report with its follower base. Unfortunately, if the release date correlates with another important event the report will not receive full attention from the media due to brevity and the news cycle. Communication is short and terse, yet spreads basic facts.
- Tweets that would be utilized between **Broadcasting** and **Agenda-Following** quadrants would react to the recent political context, not just the event. Even an older report can be brought back to life if the organisation highlights its relevance! This gives more structure to the ongoing story.

- Tweets that would be employed between the **Agenda-Setting** and **Interacting** quadrants that would be employed engage the audience with the work of the organisation. For these tweets, the organisation has to think about the interaction possibilities before the report is even written, since it will require additional content and planning due to its collaborative nature. That makes these tweets time-consuming and elaborate.
- Tweets that would be employed between the **Interacting** and **Agenda-Following** quadrants are the most time-consuming type to produce. They are meant to convey a detailed and firmly stated response on the specific issue. On the other hand, since they are constantly up-to-date and generally official statements, journalists do follow them more closely for a valuable and prompt commentary.

Lastly, we recommend that organisations follow the **Hub & Spoke model of content distribution** in the organization's content strategy. The hub represents the organisation's own space, usually a website or blog, while the spokes are different online communication channels the audience can use to reach the hub.



The Hub and Spoke Model of Online Communication

Every message is crafted for the specific spoke – for Twitter, the messages are very short and to the point, videos or other visuals are not necessary, yet lend a captivating hook to engage audiences. On the other hand, e-mail reports are lengthier and visually oriented with presentations, charts, transcripts, etc.

SUMMARY

In recent years, civil society organisations have entered competitive arena of mass media communication, where they compete for the attention of the journalists and media coverage. As the issues these organisations cover are usually highly specialised and deal with long-term problems, media outlets are not always equipped to cover them. In response, CSOs have moved to professionalise their approach, using different tactics and strategies to reach journalists. As well as creating and adopting alternative communication channels, including the online ones, organisations should craft engaging messages that perceive policies and issues as stories with one core message, several key messages and additional story-building blocks, such as data or quotes. Next, to spread the message among a journalist audience, organisations should make use of the opportunities of the digital environment. Twitter is a network widely used for semi-professional communication of news and information. There, organisations can reach out directly to journalists through either high context tweets (time-consuming but interactive) or through short broadcasting of the issues through various social media outlets that highlight key words or initiatives the public can digest (quick but less effective). It is also possible to send Direct Messages or Tag journalists whose attention an organisation wants to attract.

RECOMMENDED STEPS

1. Decide on the target audience

- Online, you can see your audience statistics in the profile. Some content planning tools, such as Buffer, also offer advanced analytics that can give you more information about the demographics and interests of your profile followers.
- For the pricing offers, see their website: <https://buffer.com/>

2. Build a Message House

- To get your thoughts together, check-out Roam, a tool for organising research and thoughts more effectively. It connects different links, pictures documents or databases together and can help you get a full picture of your communication strategy. It is a trusted tool for writers and university researchers.
- See for yourself at <https://roamresearch.com/>. Any other mind-mapping tool is a great choice as well!

3. Utilise scientific research

- Science journals are can be expensive to get access to. Here is an overview for free online journal and research databases to browse new academic findings and find inspiration from: https://www.scribendi.com/academy/articles/free_online_journal_and_research_databases.en.html
- Another option is to look for education literature. The previously mentioned 'Don't Think of an Elephant' combines scientific research with engaging writing well.

4. Add story-building blocks

- All blocks are equally important. You can help your audience understand the issue with powerful data visualization.
- For that, see: <https://informationisbeautiful.net/>

5. Tailor the message

for different communication channels

- For Twitter, choose one typography approach.
- Keep track of new features provided by the social media platforms, for example by following the Twitter Blog: <https://blog.twitter.com/>

6. Build a professional relationship with key journalists

- Journalists need content and you have one to share. Make use of it! However, always remember that journalists differ in their specialisations and interests. While some might be invested in your mission, another might need more relationship building and trust before they engage with your content.
- There are various online journalists databases where you can search those that are the most important and relevant to you.
- LinkedIn can do the job or you can invest into <https://muckrack.com/journalist-database> that can find you the right journalists timely.

7. Monitor public and media engagement, evaluate

- All social media offer analytics through which you can monitor the audience engagement and interest. For advanced versions, check out Hootsuite.com or Tweetreach.com. These allow the monitoring of multiple profiles as well as competition monitoring.

