



OPPORTUNITY

1

Drive public innovation by reigniting civil society

DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS: AMPLIFY | MOBILISE | CHANGE

Join the digital revolution!

How organisations can use digital media to transform society

Online communication is a powerful tool that can speak to all South Africans and generate social change. Yet most non-government organisations (NGOs) do not regard it as a critical driver that can significantly increase the scale and impact of their work. DGMT believes digital communications is an essential innovation strategy, which is why in 2019 it launched the Amplify: Mobilise: Change (AMC) pilot programme to engage with and upskill digital communications practitioners in the hope of creating a community of digital champions. This learning brief explores how organisations can benefit from this intervention.

DGMT’s five-year strategy (2017-2021) identifies innovation within civil society organisations (CSOs) as a key opportunity for nurturing a more innovative and inclusive society. Digital communications have been identified as significant enablers of innovation, but non-profits tend to view digital communications as a support function or add-on, as evidenced by the fact that funding in this area often lags behind programme development.

In 2017 DGMT’s Innovative and Inclusive society (IIS) team began developing a support package to shift perceptions and educate NGOs about the potentially transformative and strategic role of online communications. A needs analysis survey was conducted on Facebook and Twitter, and the overwhelming response revealed that most organisations in the not-for-profit sector need help in developing their social media strategy.

Sample responses from the digital needs analysis survey:

- > “We can actively reach more people through social media and drive different types of content/campaigns.”
- > “Our NGO is youth focused and does youth advocacy work so social media typically works best for us to reach our audience and beneficiaries.”
- > “We are a community-based organisation, and most people in our locations use Facebook simply because it is cheaper; even the unemployed that we work with are able to access it.”

NOVEMBER 2019

DEVELOPING DIGITAL CHAMPIONS

The IIS team, in partnership with Livity Africa¹, developed a two-day workshop and curriculum aimed at developing capacity in digital communications skills, focusing largely on social media. They ran five workshops with 86 participants from 70 NGOs in Cape Town, East London, Johannesburg, Durban and Port Shepstone. The major finding from these workshops was that few people are dedicated to social media or online communications. NGOs need digital champions to improve the standard of their digital communications and extend their impact and influence.

Thus, a more in-depth digital communications learning programme, Amplify: Mobilise: Change (AMC), was born. Two select groups of participants from DGMT's currently-funded implementing partners, all with an intermediate to advanced level of digital focus and outputs, were selected to form the first two cohorts. Before making the programme more widely available, it was important to work with smaller groups affiliated with DGMT to test variables such as course content, participation rates, impact and so on. The ultimate objective is to expand the course and offer it to past and future partners and the sector at large.

Extracts from the cohort nomination forms:

What are the main benefits your organisations would like to gain from this type of programme?

- > To learn ways to increase our applications (for the right target market) in order to start a waiting list. - Mieke Rautenbach, Little Angels Home(a home for disabled children).
- > To learn how to maximise our digital footprint in order to increase traffic to our online mobile pocket library. - Zilungile Zimela, FunDza Literacy Trust.

The programme has been designed primarily around online learning, supported by a three-day face-to-face workshop at the end of each cohort cycle of six months.

The programme works with participants to help them:

- > build and amplify their messages and brand;
- > mobilise action or initiate more engagement with beneficiaries and donors; and
- > create integrated campaigns and messages for positive social change.

Digital communications specialist Emma O'Shaughnessy is the AMC online content and course developer, as well as the project lead. She says: "We really wanted to understand in a granular way what the main digital communications needs are for NGOs. In some ways there exists a terror around technology. But the programme is not actually about technology. It's about harnessing digital communications for engagement and change. Technology is the means to this end, but the real learnings are around how to get the most out of your communications. There is a realisation that participants can actually do this with what they have already. They can run surveys, get information and fundamentally change the way they communicate online by creating a strong baseline from which to work. Technology then becomes an organic part of that journey."

Unique to Africa, the AMC digital pilot programme was designed with a clear vision: to help participating organisations build operational efficiency around their digital communications; to enhance organisations' ability to set up and implement online campaigns that are goal-driven and impact-focused; and to assist in the development of a new wave of digital practitioners in the sector who could lead the charge in creating high-performing, well-produced online content for local audiences to help drive social change in South Africa. On the practical side, in its first year, the programme tested variables such as the balance between online and offline learning, the strength and value of the content modules, the online learning environment experience, cohort size, as well as the pacing of the programme. Learnings from the programme's first year enabled the refinement of the model for year two and have paved the way to making the programme available to increasingly more practitioners.

Below are seven of the most important lessons that underpin the programme's teachings:

1. **Get to know your target audiences:** your communications online must be inclusive.
2. **Engage in the right way to encourage behaviour change.**
3. **Data and connectivity restraints require adaptability.**
4. **Performance tracking demonstrates impact:** work to targets and benchmarks.
5. **Digital communications are well-suited to external advocacy:** your digital communications creates a support journey.
6. **Social media and websites should be symbiotic:** your content and communications exist in an ecosystem.
7. **Support digital champions in organisations:** this can create change from within.

¹ Livity Africa has trained over 85 000 people in digital skills and content development since its launch in 2011, and recently rebranded to become Digify Africa.

1

GET TO KNOW YOUR TARGET AUDIENCES

It's important to establish the needs of the communities you are engaging before even considering content or software development. AMC itself followed this approach: it did not prescribe what participants should know, rather it used focus groups to discover their digital needs. This led to its blended approach – an online learning course combined with a face-to-face workshop. This online strategy ensures practical application of knowledge and is accessible to participants around the country. It also allows an archive of learning materials to be created. The human component delivers personal engagement and support. O'Shaughnessy shares: "It is clear that there is as much of a need for human interaction around this kind of learning as there is for self-propelled online learning in your own time, even if it is quite siloed. There is also a very strong need for an online peer environment where people can share and keep connected."



2

ENGAGE IN THE RIGHT WAY TO STIMULATE BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

There are two interlinking online behaviours that organisations need to understand in order to produce communications that can really influence positive social action and behaviour change:

- > The first is how people use technology to consume information online, what the limitations of their devices are, but also what kinds of habits they engage in as they view, select and share information. For example, an organisation participating in the course has an audience that only uses WhatsApp, so there is no point in using any other digital platform to communicate with them. If one fails to understand people's digital behaviour, no amount of investment can yield results.

- > The second is how people use their own perceptual frames (cultural, personal, social and political) to make sense of online messaging. For example, it is worth knowing what other metaphors or phrases could be used to talk about sexual violence, literacy or early childhood development in the public terrain and how we can engage with people's value systems to better position messaging around these issues for positive social action. The way that information is presented can either push people away or bring them closer. For example, using familiar, inclusive language rather than abstract, formal language helps to build trust and makes it easier for people to engage with the ideas being communicated online. Writing like a 'human' rather than an 'organisation' can also make a difference when it comes to building a connection to your audiences and encouraging them to be more curious and open-minded about an important topic.



"The thing that has probably most shifted people's perceptions is not about how well you can run a dashboard, or whether you are up to date on the latest technology, which is obviously important, but understanding what specific audiences need to hear, see and read to engage online, which can then lead to more immediate online actions, and longer term behavioural change."

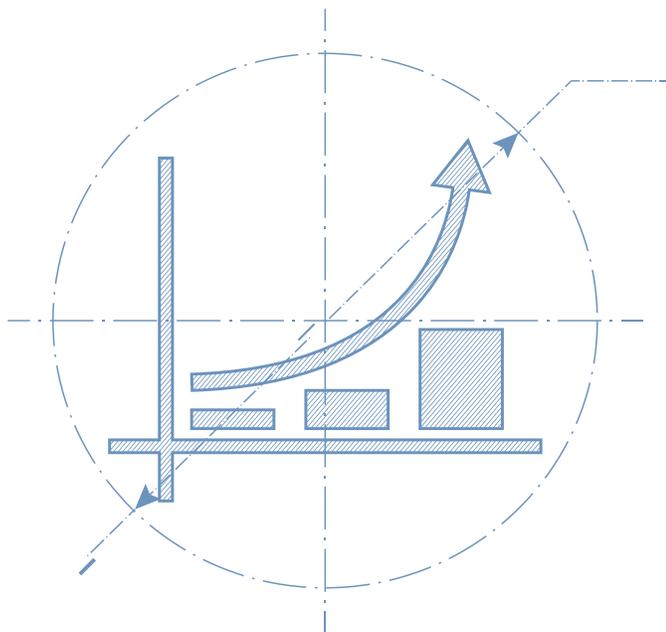
Emma O'Shaughnessy,
Digital Communications Specialist
and AMC Project Lead

3

DATA AND CONNECTIVITY RESTRAINTS REQUIRE ADAPTABILITY

In South Africa, people's online habits are selective because of high data costs and/or limited connectivity. If a product doesn't resonate with them, they are not going to 'spend' data on it. This requires a certain level of adaptability from the content provider. For example, the AMC course originally aimed to hold a bi-weekly webinar to interact with participants. However, connectivity issues meant that several attempts to do so failed. O'Shaughnessy feels that the human support element is essential, so she conducted individual bi-weekly check-in calls instead, which is better for mobile and participants who are in the field.

In the not-for-profit sector, digital media should not be designed for the desktop experience with unlimited WiFi because the target audience predominantly has access to mobile phones. Effective digital communications require content that is attention-grabbing, sharp and easy to scroll through. Examples include photo stories instead of heavy videos and infographics instead of large image galleries.



4 PERFORMANCE TRACKING DEMONSTRATES IMPACT

Metrics are measurable online indicators that show to what extent the goal of a campaign or piece of content has been achieved; they provide clear evidence of the success or failure of a campaign. Metrics are crucial because they give organisations the capacity to track their digital communications performance and ultimately, their approach. However, for most NGOs, metrics are uncharted territory.

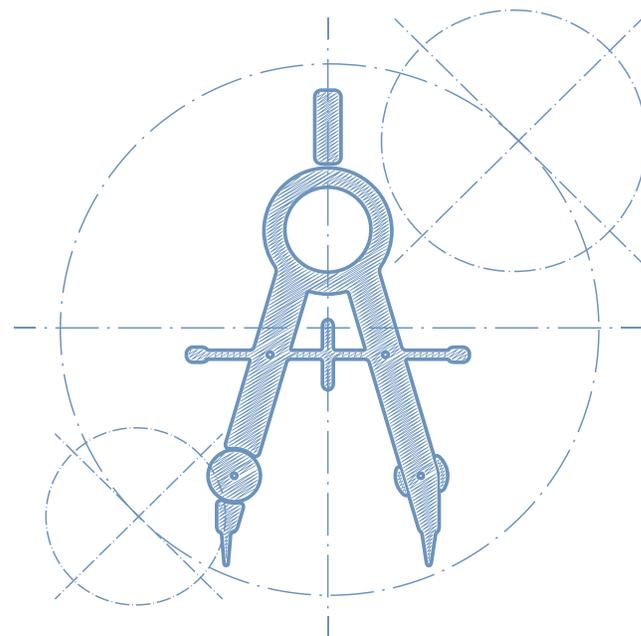
O'Shaughnessy explains: "If 25 000 people have seen a post on a website, that is good, right? But how do you know if it is having an effect? Many complexities go into tracking. The main objective may be that people read or subscribe. These kinds of metrics are trackable immediately. If organisations do not measure their digital communications, they tend to be operating in the dark. Their digital efforts are missing a component that maps the potentially groundbreaking connections with people across space and time. So, the door is standing open, but the tools may not be utilised in the most effective way."

5 DIGITAL COMMUNICATION IS WELL-SUITED TO EXTERNAL ADVOCACY

Digital communication is well-suited to organisations who work with external audiences either to advocate for change or garner public support and funding. Once the target audience has been identified, the appropriate framing and technology should be used to ensure that the message achieves its objectives. Diverse audiences may mean a message needs reframing. For example, messages targeted to beneficiaries and funders will typically not be framed in the same way. And if the audience is not online, then digital communications is not the most appropriate tool for reaching that particular group of people, and you would need to strategise accordingly.

6 SOCIAL MEDIA AND WEBSITES SHOULD BE SYMBIOTIC

Social media offers the opportunity for a human conversation, whereas websites tend to offer a more formal source of content. Nowadays, social media giants such as Facebook are also publishers and replete with organisations and businesses; equally, websites are also increasingly conversational with integrated social media feeds and comment sections on posts. Thus, organisations with unique content can harness the power of social media to push people to their websites, but they can also harness the power of social media to keep people on their websites for longer.



CONCLUSION:

MAKE A HUMAN CONNECTION AND CHANGE THE STATUS QUO

Technology is made to cater to human need and improved digital communications are aimed at creating better relationships. Ultimately, the AMC programme seeks to ask: are you engaging with communities and individuals in the right way online? If NGOs commit to using online communications as part of their strategy and fully utilise their tools and capabilities, they can propel their outputs and mission. O'Shaughnessy advises NGOs to take a page out of the for-profit sector in terms of competitiveness: "You have to challenge yourself to do your communications competitively, push yourself to achieve the best results. It is the only way you will drive yourself to design experiences and content online that have the capacity to actually change things."

Brief developed by **Daniella Horwitz**

This is the learning experience of DGMT.

The logo for DGMT, consisting of the letters 'DG' stacked above 'MT' in a white, bold, sans-serif font, set against a dark olive green square background.

**DG
MT**

WWW.DGMT.CO.ZA