

FROM NOISE TO NARRATIVE



Tools, Techniques and Insights for Conservation
Communication in a Digital World

November 2024



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the past, present and future generations of Traditional Owners from the lands on which our contributors are based, and we celebrate the stories, culture and traditions of the Indigenous peoples across all the lands, waters and oceans in which we live, work and enjoy.

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Ampliseed members visiting the Nuwas Forest, Peru © Bill Salazar

INTRODUCTION

“Say it in a tweet. If you can’t explain your point in two lines, it’s not clear enough”.

In today’s rapidly evolving digital landscape, effective communication is critical to engaging your audience and driving change.

This report shares tips and insights from leading communications experts. As a collective, their lived experience ranges from journalism to advocacy, public policy to digital marketing.

Each chapter of this report delves into a different aspect of strategic communication, from understanding the shifting media landscape to leveraging social media for maximum impact. Our goal is to create a handy guide to support you navigate the complexities of strategic communication.

The chapters began life as a series of presentations held throughout 2023 and 2024. Our aim was to engage and upskill practitioners working on landscape scale conservation and environmental resilience projects, but the core concepts are applicable to social change and innovation initiatives more broadly. The sessions were coordinated by [Ampliseed](#), a learning and leadership network facilitated by Pollination Foundation and supported by the BHP Foundation.

Our contributors generously shared their expertise and experience in building robust communication strategies to reach diverse audiences and drive meaningful action. They emphasize the importance of adapting to new communication channels, using data-driven approaches, and creating content that not only informs but inspires and mobilises action. The community insights at the end of each chapter reflect genuine questions and observations during the live sessions, offered by participants working within a diversity of global conservation and place based community-led organisations.

Whether it’s countering misinformation, engaging communities, or advocating for policy change, the strategies outlined in this report are designed to equip you with the tools to communicate in an increasingly interconnected world. Through practical examples and actionable insights, our hope is that these summaries serve as a go to resource to support you craft strategic communications to achieve lasting impact.



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CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter 1: Pitching Project Stories to the Media

Joanne Gray – former Managing Editor of the Australian Financial Review – provides insights on effective media engagement for conservation practitioners. Her key insights include understanding your purpose – ‘why’ you’re seeking publicity; leveraging your own media channels; being strategic with paid media advertising; and focusing on earned media such as stories in newspapers and tv. Crafting stories to attract journalists can be done by taking a surprising, new, and relevant angle that links to current events. Building relationships with journalists before asking for coverage is crucial, as is offering high-quality visual assets and tying stories to current events.

The Q&A session surfaced the value of hosting webinars and roundtable discussions to seed story ideas without giving away all key details. Moderating panels and attending events where journalists are present can build valuable connections. Offering exclusive content increases appeal but requires careful management of risks if priorities change. Using newswires can scale reach, while staying on top of industry events and government reports ensures timely pitches. Overall, effective media communications combine personal perspectives with transparency and links to current issues to increase visibility and credibility.

Chapter 2: Communicating for Conservation Practitioners

Sofía Beuchat – drawing from her extensive experience in journalism and content generation – explores the importance of building strong relationships with freelance journalists and editors. She provides tips on engaging these key players including the fact that freelancers are driven by the need to publish and appreciate receiving ample material. In contrast editors act as gatekeepers, selecting only the best content for their media outlets.

Key challenges in environmental communication include the media’s preference for disaster stories and tangible results over explaining processes and academic studies. Crucial strategies to attract interest include tailoring pitches to align with the specific interests of different media outlets, providing transparent and concrete evidence to counteract greenwashing, and collaborating with other organizations to present unified narratives.

Sofía shares practical tips like the “tweet principle” for concise pitching, ways to organize field trips and meetings to build relationships, and how spotlighting trends can enhance the appeal of stories. By maintaining transparency and ethical standards, conservation practitioners can reach their audiences and drive positive change.

Chapter 3: Winning Hearts and Minds

Pedro Telles – an expert in advocacy, civic engagement, and public policy – provides a compelling analysis of how rising extremist campaigners and denialists reach their audiences. He emphasizes the shift from centralized communication channels to decentralized ecosystems.

Key strategies discussed include the need for targeted messaging, precision in communication, and creating authentic content that resonates with diverse audiences. He also stresses the importance of forming diverse coalitions to reach new audiences and amplify impact. It’s important to engage with audiences through quality content that educates, inspires, and mobilizes support.

Chapter 4: Leveraging Social Media

Laura Boyd – a digital marketing and social media specialist from design and marketing platform Canva – shares insights on targeted use of social media to boost impact and reach.

Laura’s content highlights the distinct purposes of different social media platforms. Tips include leveraging Facebook specifically for community updates, Instagram for raising awareness via visually appealing highlight reels, and TikTok for authentic, unpolished content that drives awareness. Laura talks about understanding ‘the algorithm’ and creating quality content that is inspiring, actionable, and community-centric.

Discussions during the Q&A session emphasised the need for continuous testing and iteration, the pros and cons of targeted advertising, and identifying meaningful metrics to measure success.



QUICK REFERENCE SHEET

Key insights from our discussions included:



Know your 'why': Clearly define your goals in seeking publicity – is it to raise awareness, attract funding, or establish thought leadership? This will help you plan your strategy.



Tell a simple story: Follow the “tweet principle” – if you can't tell your story in two lines, you need to make it more simple.



Use different media wisely: There are different types of media – your own channels (e.g. your website), paid ads, and stories picked up by the press. Focus on getting your story covered by the press by making it interesting, timely, and connected to what's happening in the world.



Make friends with journalists: Don't wait until you need something to talk to journalists. Start building relationships early by sharing useful info about your work. This way, they'll think of you when they need a story.



Show, don't just tell: When you pitch a story, include great visuals – like photos and videos. A good picture can make your story much more appealing to the media.



Be timely and offer something special: Connect your story to current events and offer it exclusively to one media outlet to make it more appealing. Keep the journalist in the loop to avoid any surprises and build trust.



Create content that fits each platform: For example, use short, engaging videos for TikTok and more polished images for Instagram. Keep up with how these platforms work so your content gets seen.



Speak to the right people: Not everyone cares about your cause yet. Figure out who's already on your side, who might be interested, and who isn't – and then tailor your messages to each group.



Team up for stronger stories: Work with other organizations to tell bigger, more powerful stories. When you join forces, your pitch becomes more compelling to the media.



Invest in media training for your team: Learn how to explain your work clearly and in a way that grabs people's attention.



Focus on real engagement: Don't chase likes and views. Pay attention to how people are actually engaging with your content – are they commenting, sharing, or saving it? That's a better sign of success.



CHAPTER 1: PITCHING PROJECT STORIES TO THE MEDIA



JOANNE GRAY

[Joanne Gray](#) is a leading business journalist and editor. Most recently Joanne was an Executive Director at climate advisory firm Pollination, and managing editor of the *Australian Financial Review* with responsibility for finance, growth and talent. She has been a reporter and editor for the Financial Review in Australia and the US, focusing on business, economics and politics. She was formerly managing editor of *Asia money* in Hong Kong and Bloomberg News Bureau Chief in Switzerland. Joanne holds a Bachelor of Economics and a Bachelor of Laws from the University of Sydney and an MBA from Melbourne Business School and is a non-executive director of Great Walks of Australia.

Abstract: Have you ever wondered how to pitch your story to a media outlet? In this chapter, editor and strategic advisor Joanne Gray shares her extensive experience in journalism to provide insights on effective media engagement for conservation practitioners. Joanne's career spans various roles across Australia, the U.S., Europe, China, and South Africa, focusing on financial, business, and political journalism. Her deep interest in climate change and nature protection, coupled with her recent role in the Pollination advisory team, brings a wealth of knowledge to this discussion.

ENGAGING IN THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

In this chapter, I'll share with you a bit about what drives journalists, and how you can appeal to their curiosity to create more media interest, and break through the doors to get your stories out.

THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION

When seeking publicity, the fundamental question I want you to ask is "why do you want it?". It's crucial to understand your underlying purpose, and how you want to position yourself. Whether it's to gain prominence for your team, attract funding, or lead a position in your organization, defining your purpose helps you target the right audience and craft a suitable approach.

TYPES OF MEDIA

There are different kinds of media to think about to help you achieve your goals.

- 1. Owned Media:** This includes your organization's website, social media, and blogs, and other activities where you control the content.
- 2. Paid Media:** Paid advertising and promotions, which are often less desirable due to costs.
- 3. Earned Media:** This is the most valuable as it involves journalists finding your story newsworthy and choosing to cover it.

WHAT ATTRACTS JOURNALISTS

So, what attracts journalists to your stories? Journalists are drawn to stories that are surprising, new, or interesting, and often related to significant issues or a running theme. They prefer not to run "puff pieces," which are overly positive and lack depth. Instead, they focus on what their audience finds engaging and relevant.

Often one of the hardest types of story to gain traction is the "good news" story. You want to celebrate amazing outcomes, but journalists don't want to be accused of running a puff piece. They want to tell a full story, on a topic they think their audience will be interested in reading. This is one reason you need to be conscious of current news topics so you can pitch relevant stories, and consider how these stories might impact their readers' lives.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH JOURNALISTS

Journalists are keen to engage with credible spokespeople, so building relationships with journalists before you need them is essential. Try not to treat journalists as transactional contacts. Research the journalists and media outlets you'd like to reach, start with introductory conversations that provide background context to you and your organization without immediately asking for coverage. This helps establish your organization as a credible source on relevant topics.

SUPPLYING THE RIGHT MATERIALS

When pitching a story, provide a new angle or take on a current issue, and ensure you have high-quality visuals such as photos and videos. The importance of visual content has increased significantly, and media outlets now often accept externally supplied content due to financial pressures. These days it's impossible to run anything without a picture, so great pictures and video content are super important.

PERSONIFYING THE STORY

Another consideration is personifying your story. Highlighting real-life characters who personify the challenges and successes of your story can make it more compelling. Journalists look for personalities that bring the story to life and engage their audience. They also want good authorities and spokespeople to quote.

TIMING AND EXCLUSIVITY

Tie your story to current events or news cycles and offer exclusivity to increase its appeal. Journalists are less likely to cover something that has already been extensively published on other platforms.

AMPLIFYING IMPACT

LEVERAGING SOCIAL MEDIA

Journalists use social media to monitor breaking news, find sources, verify information, and engage with audiences. Ensuring your organization's social media presence is strong and engaging can attract media attention and facilitate connections with journalists.

THE ROLE OF PR AGENCIES

PR agencies can be useful where they have high-level media contacts, strong relationships, and expertise in facilitating access to key figures in your story. However, it's important to choose an agency that understands your needs and can deliver results. Not all agencies provide the same level of service, and in some cases staff may be rewarded based on the number of emails/phone calls regardless of success.

MEDIA TRAINING AND PUBLIC SPEAKING

Investing in media training and public speaking is crucial for effectively communicating your message, and a critical skill that benefits the person and organisation in other ways as well. Media training should focus on being concise and clear, translating complex issues into understandable concepts, and preparing for interviews.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP AND REPORTS

Positioning your organization as a thought leader through reports, white papers, and analyses can attract media attention. Collaborating with other organizations to produce valuable insights and promoting these through exclusive media coverage can enhance your visibility and credibility. Reports and analyses can actually create news because they show specific domain knowledge, and come up with new ideas that are backed by validated research.



COMMUNITY INSIGHTS AND EXTENDED DISCUSSIONS

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH EVENTS

Staying on top of major events and government reports in your industry is crucial. While editorial calendars can be useful, focusing on significant upcoming events and understanding the timing of key decisions can help you prepare and pitch timely stories. Staying active in industry news, speaking at conferences, participating in community groups, and hosting panels and webinars can establish your organization as an expert in its field. These activities demonstrate your commitment to relevant conversations and enhance your authority on the subject.

Building relationships with journalists through events and conferences where they are present can establish long-term connections. Offering background information and expertise without immediately pushing for a story can position your organization as a credible source.

Inviting journalist to visit field projects can also be a successful technique. although. Although you will have to invest in paying for their transport and other costs, simply by virtue of the fact that if a reporter working for a news organisation is doing something for a day or two, they are going to have to produce something because their time is so precious. But although to an extent you'll have a captive audience, understand that they need the full story – journalists really care about presenting all sides of a complex issue, not just the positive aspects.

HOSTING WEBINARS AND ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

One of the specific strategies discussed in the Q&A session was how useful is it to host webinars or roundtable discussions to build relationships with journalists without directly asking for coverage? These sessions can be useful for seeding story ideas and presenting the depth and complexity of your work. However, it's important to manage the balance of sharing enough to pique interest without giving away all the key details.

Another useful approach is inviting journalists to moderate panels. This helps them get to know the senior figures in your field and establishes them as knowledgeable about the topic. While they can't report on the panel they moderate, it builds a relationship that can be valuable for future interactions.

EXCLUSIVE CONTENT AND TIMELINESS

The discussion emphasized the importance of exclusivity and tying stories to current events to attract media interest. Offering exclusive content can make your story more appealing, but it comes with the risk that the story might not be published if the publication's priorities change. Maintaining open communication with journalists and understanding their needs can help mitigate this risk.

Alternatively, using newswires like AAP or Reuters can be an effective way to scale your news piece and reach a broader audience. However, it's important to consider whether the story might benefit more from in-depth coverage by specific outlets.

CONCLUSION

Effective media engagement requires understanding the media landscape, building relationships with journalists, leveraging social media, and investing in media training. By positioning your organization as a credible source and thought leader, you can attract media attention and effectively communicate your conservation message. The insights from the Q&A session further reinforce the importance of personalization, transparency, and strategic collaboration in media engagement.

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CHAPTER 2: COMMUNICATING FOR CONSERVATION PRACTITIONERS



SOFÍA BEUCHAT

[Sofía Beuchat](#) is an award-winning bilingual freelance journalist and translator. She graduated cum laude from the Diego Portales University and has more than 25 years of experience in the most prestigious newspapers and magazines in Chile. Sofía currently writes for the newspaper *El Mercurio*, she has worked for *Paula* magazine, a traditional Chilean publication with a feminist perspective. She also provides support to BHP Foundation in Chile and edits cookbooks.

Abstract: Have you ever wondered how to attract a journalist to write a feature article about your work? In this chapter, award-winning freelance journalist Sofía Beuchat shares effective communication strategies for conservation practitioners, drawing on her extensive experience in journalism and content generation.

FREELANCERS AND EDITORS: A DUAL APPROACH

Freelance writers are driven to get their stories published as it directly impacts their income. Therefore, making them your allies can be incredibly beneficial. They appreciate receiving ideas and photographs, and it's their job to decide what to use. Hence, it's essential to maintain a good relationship with them and provide them with ample material to work with.

Editors act as goalkeepers, sifting through a plethora of information to select what's best for their media outlet. Their job is challenging, as they receive vast amounts of information but can only publish a fraction.

When pitching ideas, it's crucial to keep both freelancers and editors happy. Building a relationship with the editor without undermining the freelancer is key – unless the editor is your friend, it's usually best to talk to the freelancer first.

CHALLENGES IN ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION

INSIGHTS FROM JOURNALISTS

Environmental issues present specific challenges. When preparing for this conference, I reached out to a WhatsApp group called Agenda Medio Ambiental, comprising nearly 400 journalists and other professionals. I posed questions about press requests and the type of coverage they seek.

- 1. Disasters:** Journalists do tend to favour stories about disasters and endangered species, because these provide compelling content for social media and traditional media.
- 2. Processes vs. Results:** While processes are crucial for NGOs, journalists are more interested in tangible results and numbers. Academic studies are often deemed too technical and are rarely pursued unless they provide clear, accessible information. Academic studies can be great as background information, but the news is rarely the study itself.
- 3. Climate Change:** Climate change remains a significant issue, especially when it has immediate impacts on people.
- 4. Local Relevance:** Stories closer to home are preferred. For instance, issues in China are less likely to be covered in Chile compared to regional issues like the water crisis in Uruguay.
- 5. Exclusivity:** Media outlets seek exclusive content. A press release sent to multiple outlets is less likely to be published. You can look for different angles for different publishers, but don't offer the same press release to everybody.
- 6. Human Stories:** These are often used to illustrate a larger issue rather than being the main story.
- 7. Conflicts of Interest:** Conflicts of interest are checked, at least in serious media, so expect the journalists to check the background of your organisation.

INSIGHTS FROM EDITORS

I also contacted an editor at one of the main environmental media organisations in Chile, Ladera Sur. They are a very influential opinion leader in Chile, that talk about nature, conservation, environment, science, outdoor life, and travel. Their purpose is to reconnect people with nature to heal the planet. They understand the concept of nature as being guided by scientific knowledge, conservation and biodiversity; whereas, the environment has to do with people.

- 1. Revenue:** Editors are looking for stories that are innovative or educational that relate to the environment, nature and outdoor life. It's important to remember that advertising revenue typically comes from outdoor brands like camping equipment, rather than from organizations related with environment and nature.
- 2. Greenwashing:** Publications are in general suspicious of large companies known for negative impact on the environment. All content is researched and evaluated and checked with the commercial team.
- 3. Advertising:** Some publications may expect advertising in return for accepting your organic content. Make sure that if this is the case, you speak openly about it with the editors, and try to keep the advertising as separate from the content as possible.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

THE TWEET PRINCIPLE

An editor once advised me, "Say it in a tweet." This means if you can't explain your point in two lines, it's not clear enough. A concise and clear pitch is more likely to catch an editor's attention.

The two-line tweet should say 'what is it' and 'why is it important', no more than that. You can include statistics or a specific number (e.g. "we've only got water for 10 days left"), but no details.

Of course, you can add information after your 'tweet', but it's a really helpful exercise to boil it down to two lines, as this will make your point clear in your mind. If the tweet is well done and captures the interest of the journalist or writer, they will consider the details.

TRANSPARENCY

When contacting a journalist, it's important to clearly indicate if there is commercial content involved. This builds trust and ensures ethical communication. Journalists don't mind if you are representing a brand, but you need to be clear when contacting a journalist if there's something you want.

CUSTOMIZATION

Tailor your message to the specific media outlet or journalist you are targeting. Understand their interests and perspectives and pitch accordingly.

PRESS RELEASES

Use press releases as supplementary material rather than the main pitch. Offer them after gauging interest from the initial pitch.

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS AND EXTENDED DISCUSSIONS

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH JOURNALISTS

One participant highlighted the importance of building relationships with journalists to understand their interests better. Establishing a network is crucial, as knowing the person behind the email or WhatsApp message adds a personal touch and fosters trust. While field trips and meetings might not always result in immediate coverage, they lay the groundwork for future interactions. Organizing field trips and meetings during less busy times can facilitate better attendance and engagement from journalists. Transparency about expectations for coverage from such events is crucial.

WHEN TO BRING IN THE HUMAN STORY

Human stories and spokespeople are very important elements for writing an article, but typically they should not be the primary focus of the initial pitch. Instead, once interest is established (through the two-line tweet), highlighting a compelling human story can add depth and emotional appeal to the coverage.

The human angle makes the story more emotional, and interesting to the reader, but it won't sell the story by itself.



COLLABORATION – IDENTIFYING TRENDS

Sometimes your story may not be enough on its own, but joining forces with other organizations working towards the same goal can strengthen your pitch. Identifying and highlighting trends can make your pitches more compelling, and collaborating with others in the field allows you to present a broader narrative that increases the appeal to media outlets.

For example, one institution helping 10, or 100, or even 1000 kids to read may not be enough. But if you can tell a journalist: there are 10 NGO's working on this issue, and I can put you in contact with all of them if you include me, then your chances of getting the story out increase quite significantly.

HOW TO SHARE 'GOOD NEWS' AND AVOID GREENWASHING

Greenwashing is a significant concern. To counteract this, transparency and concrete evidence are vital. Providing statistics, detailed processes, and tangible results can help build credibility. Collaborating with other organizations to present a unified front on an issue can also mitigate suspicions of greenwashing.

Although 'bad news' stories often catch the eye of a journalist, you can also use this to your advantage as an opportunity to share solutions and good news stories. After reporting on a disaster, the media want to share what people are doing to mitigate the damage. This is a good time to have stories of hope ready to share. Remember, this is about results, not processes – Focus on how you are making an impact in the context of the damage, rather than on the general work of your organization.

TAILORING PITCHES FOR DIFFERENT MEDIA

A common challenge is tailoring pitches for different media outlets. Just as one would customize a resume for various job applications, pitches should be customized to align with the specific interests and focus areas of each media outlet. This might require more effort, but it increases the chances of coverage.

CONCLUSION

Communicating for conservation requires a nuanced understanding of both the media landscape and the specific challenges of environmental issues. By building strong relationships with freelancers and editors, crafting concise and clear pitches, and maintaining transparency and ethical standards, conservation practitioners can effectively share their stories and drive positive change. The insights from the Q&A session further reinforce the importance of personalization, transparency, and strategic collaboration in media engagement.



Ngurrara Rangers ©Pollination Foundation

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CHAPTER 3: WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS



PEDRO TELLES

[Pedro Telles](#) is an advocacy, civic engagement, and public policy expert with extensive experience in building and leading civil society organizations and movements. Among many other achievements, Pedro is the cofounder of Quid, a communications lab focused on issues related to democracy and human rights, and Director and Founding Board Member at D-Hub, a new international initiative dedicated to network-building, capacity-building and strategy support for democracy defenders. He has a background in environmental issues, campaigning, communications and development studies, and teaches advocacy and social change at the School of International Relations, Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV).

Abstract: In this chapter, Pedro Telles shares insights into the fight for ‘hearts and minds’ – how civil society can effectively communicate and engage in the 21st century, especially in the face of rising extremism and denialism. He emphasizes the necessity of adapting to contemporary digital culture and political contexts as we navigate the new communication landscape for advocacy and public policy.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF COMMUNICATION

THE FIGHT FOR HEARTS AND MINDS

In this chapter, I want to talk to you about the fight for hearts and minds – a crucial fight for democracy and for meeting environmental challenges, particularly in times of rising extremism and denialism.

Part of the reason I co-founded the communications lab Quid was to focus on understanding the challenges that face civil society and people who stand for democracy, specifically with regards to how these sectors are lagging behind the communications and engagement undertaken by extremists. I’m also a director and founding board member of D-Hub, a new organization dedicated to network-building, capacity-building and strategy support for democracy defenders at the global level.

I’d like to start with a quote from Andrew Breitbart, founder of Breitbart News, one of the most prominent media vehicles for fake news, disinformation and extremism in the USA.

Andrew Breitbart - “Politics is downstream from culture”

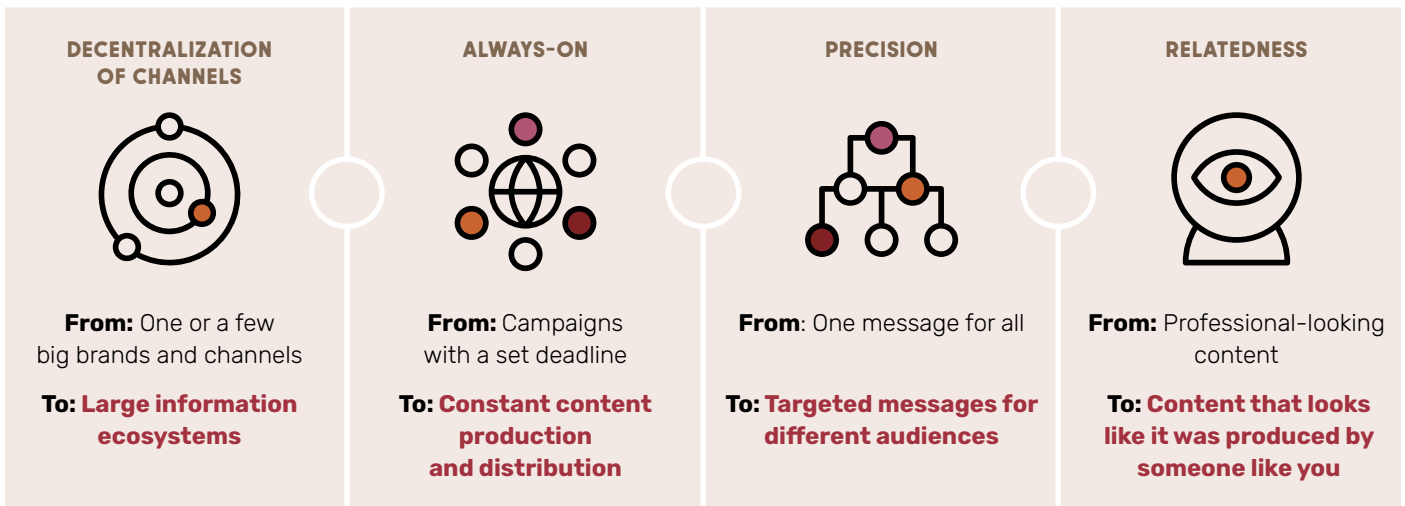
This Breitbart quote highlights the importance of cultural influence in shaping political outcomes – if you want to drive structural change in politics, you must first change culture. Extremists have worked out effective ways to share their views, and we need to learn from how they do it. Not to mimic their techniques of using fake news and other illegal or unethical practices, but the effective tactics and strategies that can be incorporated, adapted and improved without crossing red lines, and also to identify what sorts of regulations we need to stop their wrongdoings.

HOW IS PUBLIC OPINION BEING SHAPED BY EXTREMISTS?

Over recent years, the landscape of communication has drastically shifted from centralized big media channels to a decentralized ecosystem where messages are consistently distributed across various platforms. This shift demands a new approach in communication strategies, focusing on frequency, volume, precision, and relatability.

There are four main strengths that support extremists in shaping public opinion that connect and reinforce each other.

- 1. Decentralization of Communication Channels:** The era of relying on a few major media outlets is over. Now, messages are spread through an ecosystem involving not only various platforms (like WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Spotify, and more), but also various brands and spokespeople that coordinate messaging and comms strategies. This decentralized approach creates a perception of consensus, making messages more convincing.
- 2. Always-On Communication:** The traditional campaign model with sporadic high-intensity periods has been replaced by continuous content production and distribution. Campaigns are still relevant for strategic moments such as bringing a new topic to the public agenda or pressuring key people around decision-making moments, but effective communication now requires constant engagement to maintain influence. If you want to win hearts and minds, you have to have frequency and volume in your messaging, and you have to always be ‘on’.



3. Precision in Messaging: The one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective. It's not necessarily a problem to have one big slogan, but your messages and content must be tailored to specific audience segments which are strategic to your cause or objective, recognizing the unique perspectives and concerns of different groups.

4. Relatable Content: People are more likely to trust content that appears to come from peers rather than professional productions. Simplified, relatable messages resonate more with the general public than slick high-end productions. Also, unbranded content is often more effective than branded.

BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION ECOSYSTEMS

UNDERSTANDING YOUR COMMUNICATION ECOSYSTEM

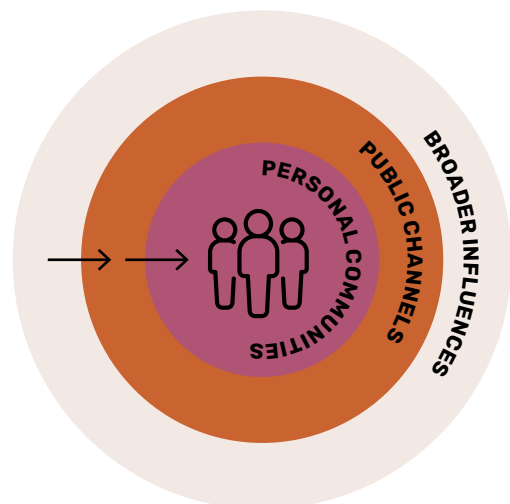
Understanding and leveraging the concept of a communication ecosystem is crucial. This involves recognising the interconnected layers of influence from personal communities to broader public channels.

An illustration of how this works in your personal life, is to start by thinking about the communities you belong to. This is usually where you get the information you trust the most, and they have the most effect on shaping your opinions – your family, friends, people you are close to at work, at school or in the church, on WhatsApp or Messenger. You are listening to what they are saying all the time, and they are trusted sources of information.

At the second level are public channels – the websites, influencers, platforms and media vehicles – you choose to follow. So there is that social network profile you follow, that podcast you listen to, there's a newsletter you subscribe to, that news website where you get your news every day. These are not intimate communities, but you have chosen to follow them so there is a level of trust there.

At the third level there are sources of information and opinion who you did not choose to follow, but you come across nevertheless because they are shared or referenced by someone you know. A video that has gone viral or breaking news that a friend shared from a journalist you had never heard of are examples here.

Creating an effective communication strategy involves integrating messages across these layers, ensuring consistent exposure from multiple trusted sources. The idea being that when I open my WhatsApp group, there's a message there, and when I go to church someone is talking about the topic, and someone is talking about it on a YouTube channel I follow, then a friend of mine shares something from an NGO that's talking about the same thing, etc. When this happens, the effect is that you tend to decide 'I should pay attention to this' because everyone is talking about it.



- **Personal Communities:** Trusted sources like family, friends, and community groups play a significant role in shaping opinions.
- **Public Channels:** These include social media profiles, podcasts, newsletters, and news websites that individuals choose to follow.
- **Broader Influences:** Organizations, movements, and opinion leaders that indirectly influence individuals through shared content.



TARGETING AUDIENCES

Different audiences are going to require different ecosystems. You're not going to be able to build a single ecosystem that talks to everyone, because different people follow different things, and get informed through different channels. For effective advocacy, it's essential to understand and segment audiences into the base, the middle, and the opposition.

- **The Base:** These are supporters who already agree with your cause. The goal is to keep them engaged and mobilized around your calls to action, and get their help to reach people they know in the middle.
- **The Middle:** This majority group is often indifferent or unaware of the issues you stand for, and swaying them your way is usually decisive for achieving policy, electoral and cultural shifts in society. Efforts should focus on persuading and converting them to become part of your base – keeping in mind that this tends to be a large and diverse group, requiring further segmentation and a focus on the most strategic subgroups according to your objective and context. One of the ways extremists have been winning elections is through bringing the middle closer to their side.
- **The Opposition:** These are individuals who actively disagree with your cause. The strategy here is to neutralize their influence and prepare for countering their actions. If you have a short-term objective, it may be more effective to focus your efforts in the talking middle than in dealing more directly with the opposition – but for any type of structural, long-term victory you will need to grapple with them.

STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING ECOSYSTEMS

There are four main ways you can build a communication ecosystem – which includes social media pages and profiles, newspapers, podcasts, YouTube channels, etc.

1. **Acquisition:** Buying existing channels and brands can quickly establish an audience.
2. **Building:** Creating new channels from scratch, which takes more time and resources but gives you full control.
3. **Participating:** Joining, partnering with and leveraging existing communities and platforms that align with your goals – many organisations already have broad networks that you may be able to access, and there are also open communities in social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups.
4. **Advertising:** Using targeted ads to reach specific audiences effectively, which can be highly effective, especially around campaign pushes but are expensive and insufficient in itself.

For example, at Quid we built an ecosystem with 25 million followers spread across some 50 profiles in different social media, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, etc. Many of these channels are not primarily talking about politics or causes. They're talking about what people in the middle are interested in – some channels talk about gossip and entertainment, others about humour and memes, and others about curiosities and trivia. This is where people who are in the middle, who are the people that we need to convince and to bring to our base, are going to engage. And what is done there is what we call "putting broccoli in the rice": every now and then, political content is added to the posts, but maintaining each channel's traditional language

Different key audiences require different ecosystems, and the best way to know your key audiences is through research (quantitative, qualitative and message testing).

BASE

What you need to do:
Engage

Keep in mind that your base may include different groups (i.e. Women in universities, young unemployed professionals, progressive entrepreneurs).

It is crucial to fire up the debate and to help reach the middle

MIDDLE

What you need to do:
Persuade

Keep in mind that the middle includes different groups and that some are more important than others.

It is crucial for any structural long-lasting change

OPPOSITION

What you need to do:
Neutralize

Keep in mind that they will organise to confront you.

It is crucial to anticipate likely attacks, and be ready for them

and aesthetics to make sure the message will resonate – a celebrity criticizing a policy decision in a celebrity gossip page, for example, or trivia about an economic problem that is impacting citizens.

Importantly, building truly effective communications ecosystems around the causes we stand for is usually a task beyond the reach of a single organization, given the scope and size of the challenge. It is an effort that should ideally involve a group of organizations and funders in the field operating with the same mindset, and working in a coordinated manner to some extent – which is something extremists already do.

GROWING YOUR AUDIENCE

MONETIZATION

Extremists and denialists have mastered the business model of digital content production, creating a sustainable cycle of monetization and audience growth. They've tapped into three main revenue streams:

- **Advertising Revenue:** These content producers get paid by advertisers who sponsor their channels, podcasts, or websites. This is especially common on platforms like YouTube, where popular channels attract significant ad revenue.
- **Platform Payments:** Once these creators reach a certain follower threshold, platforms like YouTube start paying them for their content. They often have networks that cross-promote each other, boosting followers and engagement.
- **Direct Audience Monetization:** They also earn directly from their audience through subscriptions, paid content, and merchandise sales. This includes using platforms like Substack for newsletters or selling courses and exclusive content.

While extremists and denialists have developed these revenue streams, progressive and democratic movements haven't caught up. We still rely heavily on philanthropy, which limits our sustainability and reach compared to these well-funded networks. Philanthropy will of course continue to be important, but it is crucial that we explore other sources of revenue.

THE ROLE OF BIG TECH

Big Tech companies like Meta, Google, and TikTok have become de facto regulators of political advertising, given their monopoly power and the fact that advertisers have to abide by the rules they set – while governments struggle to approve public regulation and implement effective accountability measures. These companies, driven by commercial interests, significantly influence the dissemination of political content and election outcomes.

In response, we must to address these challenges on several fronts:

- **Ethical Use of Digital Tools:** We need to invest more in communication strategies, using the existing digital tools and platforms ethically. This includes better data analytics, targeted messaging, and online engagement to counter misinformation and extremist content.
- **Advocacy for Better Regulation:** We have to continue pushing for more stringent regulations on digital platforms to curb harmful content and ensure fairer practices in political advertising.
- **Grassroots Engagement:** We need to better connect digital activism with on-the-ground efforts to foster deeper community engagement and political participation, integrating online and offline from scratch instead of seeing these two things as separate.
- **Blurring Policy and Politics:** We must blur the lines between policy advocacy and direct political engagement, focusing more on participating in electoral processes and influencing political outcomes directly – because this is what the other side is already doing, successfully.

It's essential for progressive movements to adapt to the changing digital landscape and compete more effectively against these well-funded extremist networks.



CASE STUDIES

I'd like to share some practical examples from Brazil that showcase interesting strategies in building and leveraging communication ecosystems:

1. **BolsoFlix:** This platform was created to counter Bolsonaro's influence by organizing effective anti-Bolsonaro videos on various critical issues like the pandemic, corruption, violence, lies, and the economy. The platform's unique Netflix-like format, with categorized videos, allowed easy access and sharing, primarily aiming to engage and inform undecided voters. It became a significant independent progressive community in Brazil, leveraging WhatsApp groups to foster deeper engagement and mobilization.
2. **Landless Workers Movement (MST):** The MST underwent a strategic rebranding to appeal to a broader audience, particularly focusing on food production and sovereignty rather than just land occupation. By emphasizing their role in producing organic and healthy food, they connected with more moderate segments of society concerned with food security and poverty alleviation. The movement also embraced branding efforts, promoting their identity through merchandise like caps and T-shirts, thereby gaining visibility and support beyond their traditional base.
3. **Brazil's Black Coalition for Rights:** During the pandemic, this coalition launched a major campaign to distribute food to those affected by the crisis, while simultaneously advocating for social protection policies and criticizing the government's inadequate pandemic response. They linked their humanitarian efforts with a broader political agenda, including campaigning for the election of Black candidates. This approach aimed to address immediate needs while building long-term political representation and power for the Black community in Brazil.

These examples highlight how different groups are using innovative strategies to connect with wider audiences, reframe their messages, and address both immediate and systemic issues. An overarching theme is the importance of aligning social actions with broader political objectives to create sustainable change.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

We need to keep in mind that the primary objective of extremists is not just to win elections but to end democracy. Winning elections is simply a tool they use to achieve this broader goal. They are engaged in a dual battle: winning elections and simultaneously destroying democratic norms. Similarly, we must also engage in two battles: securing electoral victories and neutralizing the extremists and authoritarian's ability to set the political agenda—these are complementary but distinct challenges.

Democracy, characterized by the ability to participate in public deliberation and challenge those in power, is inherently vulnerable to abuse from people who use its principles to advocate for repression and regime closure, particularly during periods of structural changes in the ways society communicates which open space for disruptive forms of abuse – like what we see with large-scale disinformation campaigns in social media. It's important to remember that this struggle is not a fair or reasonable fight; it's like "playing chess with a pigeon": on your side you're trying to follow the rules of the game, but on the other side is a pigeon – they are just going to fly away and s**t on your board.

If you'd like to think about this some more, I recommend reading a book called *The Paradox of Democracy: Free Speech, Open Media, and Perilous Persuasion* by Zac Gershberg and Sean Illing.

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS FROM EXTENDED DISCUSSION

FOCUSING LIMITED RESOURCES FOR GREATEST IMPACT

- **Building partnerships:** Small teams should acknowledge their limits and prioritize coalition-building with other organizations with complementary skills or who target different audiences. In the current landscape, it's increasingly difficult for any single entity to drive systemic change alone. Recognizing your strengths and coordinating efforts, particularly in lobbying, research, or grassroots organizing, is crucial for making an impact.
- **Identifying and Reaching the Right Audience:** Organizations need to clearly define their target audience and evaluate their capacity to effectively communicate with them. If there's a gap in reaching the desired audience, consider partnering with other groups that have expertise or access to priority audiences. Power mapping and research are essential tools for understanding and engaging the right demographic.

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Developing robust communication infrastructure is vital for organizations. While not every organization can manage extensive media channels, having a network of groups with strong communication capabilities can support the broader ecosystem. This collective strength ensures that different and diverse voices can share their message more broadly.

BALANCING COMMUNICATION AND FUNDRAISING

Managing the balance between communication and fundraising is a complex but essential task. While securing funds is critical, communication strategies should also aim for broader goals, such as policy advocacy and system change. Effective storytelling can simultaneously enhance fundraising efforts and public engagement, serving multiple organizational needs.

CHALLENGES IN REGULATING BIG TECH AND DATA

Regulating big tech and data is one of the biggest contemporary challenges, comparable to the historical struggle with big oil. The dominance of big tech in data control poses substantial risks to democracy and societal norms. We urgently need stringent regulations and accountability measures, and the complexity of the issue makes this a difficult battle that will require everyone's efforts. We can't see big tech regulation as something that should be left out just for tech-focused NGOs, the same way we can't see climate action as something that should be left out just for environmental NGOs.

NAVIGATING ADVOCACY AND LEGAL CONSTRAINTS

NGOs must strategically navigate legal constraints while pushing the boundaries of advocacy and elections-related work. This involves understanding legal limits and exploring ways to be bold within them. Calculated risks are often necessary, especially in politically sensitive contexts. Engaging funders in open discussions about these challenges and encouraging support for daring initiatives is also important.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

The group discussion highlighted the importance of collective action and well-coordinated communication strategies. Sharing resources and strengths among organizations can lead to more effective advocacy and public engagement. Encouraging participation from diverse team members in these discussions is another good way to ensure that strategies are integrated across different organizational functions, promoting a unified and strategic approach to addressing challenges and identifying opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The changing landscape of communication requires a strategic and adaptive approach to effectively engage and influence public opinion ("hearts and minds"), especially in the face of rising extremism and denialism. By understanding the interconnected nature of communication ecosystems, leveraging continuous and targeted messaging, and ensuring relatable content, civil society can better compete with the well-funded and sophisticated communication strategies employed by extremists. Integrating grassroots efforts with digital advocacy and pushing for ethical use of digital tools and better regulation of big tech are essential steps to safeguard democracy and promote progressive causes.





4

CHAPTER 4: LEVERAGING SOCIAL MEDIA



Laura Boyd

[Laura Boyd](#) is a social media manager at Canva, an online tool on a mission to empower the world to design. She develops creative strategies and content for the Canva Global Social Media accounts for Business and Consumer audiences. Prior to her current role, she developed social media strategies for leading Australian lifestyle publications including The Australian Women's Weekly, Elle Magazine and Better Homes & Gardens. When she's not at work, she can usually be found blending scraps for her balcony worm farm.

Abstract: Have you ever wondered how to best use social media to gain more followers, capture hearts and change minds? In this chapter, Laura Boyd, from Canva's Marketing Supergroup, shares her thoughts on how social media is being used today and upcoming shifts in the landscape. She examines high profile brands in conservation that are 'winning' in the social media space and why; proven formulas that can be put to work on different channels; and how to get 'the algorithm' to work for you.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

SOCIAL MEDIA TODAY

Social media has changed a lot since Facebook launched in 2004. Back then, Donald Trump wasn't even president, and smartphones weren't invented until 2007. Now, almost half of U.S. adults get their news from social media. TikTok has overtaken Google in search volume, and two-thirds of social media users purchased something on a social app last year.

These changes highlight how important social media has become for people to discover brands, join cultural movements, and make informed decisions. For example, folks now turn to TikTok for restaurant recommendations, Instagram to find hairdressers, and Pinterest for outfit ideas. It's amazing how these platforms have diversified their functionalities.

PLATFORM 101

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT PLATFORMS

Let's dive into the unique strengths of various social media platforms:

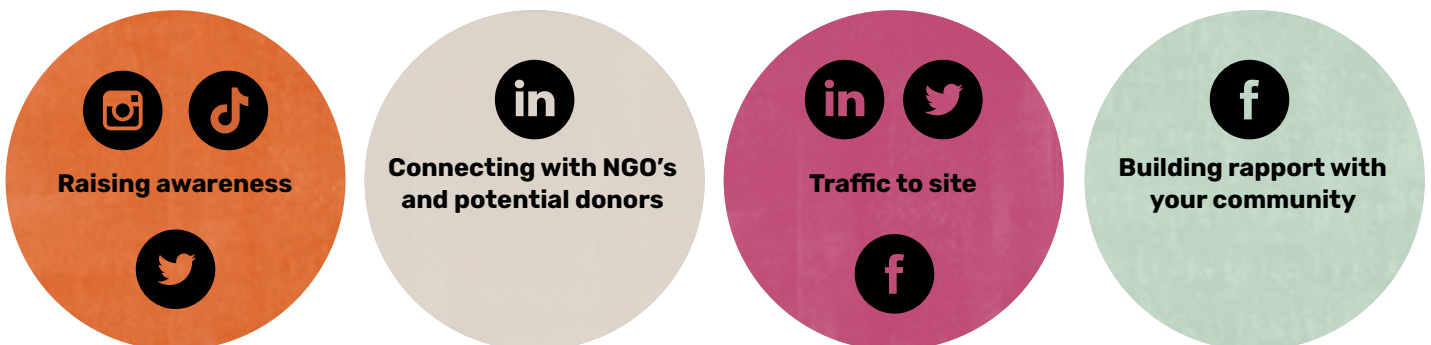
- **Meta (formerly Facebook):** Think of this as your community hub. It's perfect for updating your existing community, driving traffic to your website, and answering questions. It's like a community notice board. However, it's not the best place for brand discovery, as people mainly use it to connect with friends and family.
- **Instagram:** This is the polished extension of your website – your highlight reel. Use it for announcements, achievements, and showcasing your brand. It's fantastic for building brand awareness but not so great for driving traffic to your website, except for Instagram Stories with clickable links.
- **TikTok:** TikTok is all about real, unpolished content. It's perfect for discovery and awareness, especially for niche interests. Whether it's worm farming or horse mane braiding, you'll find an audience here. However, it's not designed for driving traffic to your site.
- **Pinterest:** This platform is all about crafts, hobbies, and gift ideas. It's heavily consumer-focused and not really suitable for NGOs focused on education and advocacy.
- **LinkedIn:** Ideal for B2B awareness, networking, and establishing thought leadership. It's great for connecting with donors and grant bodies, but not for reaching general consumers. LinkedIn is also a great channel for attracting talent – particularly the next generation of knowledge workers and managers. Potential superstar hires will use LinkedIn to evaluate your company and get a sense of the career opportunities available to them. Consider using this channel as a way to showcase the growth journeys of your current staff, the culture of your company and the mission driving you forward.
- **X (formerly Twitter):** Best for news and updates, especially in the media space. However, be cautious, as the platform has evolved and may be less controlled.

	Good for:	Not good for:
 PINTEREST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring your craft hobbies • Finding different ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educating your audience about your brand • NGO's - this is a consumer platform
 FACEBOOK/META	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updating your existing community • Driving traffic to your site (easily clickable links) • Answering questions and connecting with your audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discovery - this is a family and friends platform
 LINKEDIN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • B2B Awareness • Thought Leadership • Networking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaching consumers
 TWITTER/X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News and updates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertising - currently boycotted by many companies
 INSTAGRAM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A polished extension of your website • Announcements and achievements - i.e. the highlight reel • Discovery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traffic to site - except through IG stories
 TIK TOK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Real" content showing the impact you have on the world • Discovery - mass reach for every niche • Educating your audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traffic to site - this is a discovery platform

IDENTIFYING GOALS AND CREATING GOOD CONTENT

To effectively leverage social media, start by identifying clear goals. Whether you want to raise brand awareness, connect with other sector players, or drive website traffic, knowing your objectives helps you prioritize platforms and content.

IDENTIFYING WHAT YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE CAN HELP YOU FIGURE OUT WHERE TO FOCUS YOUR PRIORITIES



SO, WHAT IS “GOOD” CONTENT, ANYWAY?

Good content should be:

- **Inspiring:** Content that evokes awe and inspiration is powerful. For example, posts about individuals overcoming adversity or significant achievements.
- **Actionable:** Provide valuable, practical information that people can use immediately. Tutorials, tips, and how-to guides work well.
- **Community-Focused:** Focus on adding value to your community rather than tooting your own horn. Highlight the voices and stories of those you help.

GETTING STARTED

CREATING YOUR STRATEGY

When developing your strategy:

- **Identify Goals:** Determine what you want to achieve on each platform. For example, do you want to use LinkedIn to position your brand as a thought leader? Then leave updates about office renovations out of your content plan.
- **Content Pillars:** Define the themes integral to your brand. These should be clear and specific. For example, ‘water scarcity’ and ‘period poverty’ are content pillars, ‘education’ and ‘inspiration’ are not, because they are not clear themes.
- **Quality Over Quantity:** Focus on creating valuable content rather than producing a large volume of mediocre posts. Social Media users are ruthless and won’t give you any grace for creating dull, ineffective content, so don’t stretch yourself to produce at scale.
- **Content Filter:** Develop a checklist to qualify content before posting. Ensure it aligns with your goals and adds value to your audience. For example, “does this fit a content pillar”, “does this educate or inspire?”, and “what are we trying to do with this content” are all helpful questions to ask.

CREATING YOUR CONTENT

When creating content:

- **Style:** Create content that fits the style of the platform. Vertical videos for TikTok, polished images for Instagram, LinkedIn is a place for thought leadership and articles, etc.
- **Purpose:** Clearly define the purpose of each piece of content. Always ask “what are we trying to do with this content?”. If the answer isn’t clear (i.e. “educate people about water scarcity” or “position ourselves as experts on coral reef conservation”), you need to go back to the drawing board.
- **Tools:** Use the tools you have, like your phone, to create content. Did you know that most of Canva’s videos are shot on an iPhone? Don’t worry about having the best equipment in the world – everyone already has the tools they need to get started.
- **Test and then Test Again:** Test and iterate. Just because something didn’t work once doesn’t mean it won’t ever work. Keep testing and refining an idea in order to perfect it – social media is a craft like any other.

A QUICK NOTE ON ‘THE ALGORITHM’

A question I hear a lot is, “what works in the algorithm/how has the algorithm changed” etc.

The algorithm = a code that determines how content is served to users.

Here is some quick advice for working with social media algorithms:

- **Pick appropriate content:** Social algorithms respond to the type of content people like to see – for example, people favour video content, so video will have more reach
- **Make your content more searchable:** Social platforms want you using THEIR app, but some of the things you can do to increase your reach include:
 - Add text in the app to improve searchability
 - Don’t create videos in one specific platform, use an external editor (like Canva!) to avoid a watermark
- **Categorise with Hashtags:** Use hashtags to categorize your content, to make it easier for the algorithm to serve your content to others.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Remember, social media algorithms are just responding to what people like. Focus on creating valuable, engaging content, and you'll naturally perform better. If you need help getting started, tools like Canva can be incredibly useful, especially since it's free for nonprofits. Happy posting!

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS FROM EXTENDED DISCUSSION

QUALITY VS. QUANTITY

Focus on quality. Consistency in publishing is less important than the value of the content. If what you're posting is valuable, it will resonate regardless of frequency.

PAID CONTENT AND ADS

Ensure your content is effective before boosting it. Instead of boosting posts, run targeted ads through ads manager for more precise audience targeting.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Look beyond views and follower counts. Engagement metrics like saves, comments, and watch time are more indicative of success. For LinkedIn, clicks are a valuable metric.

REPURPOSING TESTIMONIALS

Focus on the parts of testimonials that speak to your audience's values. Highlight results and benefits that are immediately relevant to them.

ORGANIZING YOUR STRATEGY

Plan content one month or one quarter in advance. Map out big milestones, assign content pillars, and ensure each piece aligns with your goals.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Use social media to see what content resonates with you and your audience. Follow brands in your space for inspiration and insights.

CONCLUSION

Navigating the social media landscape requires adaptability. By understanding the unique purposes of different platforms, setting clear goals, and focusing on quality content, you can effectively leverage social media to enhance your impact. Remember to continuously test, iterate, and stay attuned to what resonates with your audience.



AMPLISEED MEMBERS

Indigenous Desert Alliance

10 Deserts Project is sustaining the largest Indigenous-led connected conservation network on Earth that aims to keep Australia's arid lands healthy for the benefit of the entire world.

- Web address: <https://10deserts.org/>

Nature United

The *Forest Conservation in the Boreal Project* works with First Nations in the Canadian boreal to help build a socially, economically and environmentally resilient future for Indigenous communities and for nature.

- Web address: <https://www.natureunited.ca/about-us/where-we-work/manitoba/>

Conservation International

The *Alto Mayo Project* is supporting Awajun indigenous communities and migrant farmers become effective stewards of the landscape's natural resources.

- Web address: <https://www.conservation.org/peru/iniciativas-actuales/awajun-indigenous-communities>

Great Barrier Reef Foundation

Resilient Reefs Initiative is piloting work with five World Heritage sites around the world, to build the resilience of coral reefs and the communities that depend on them.

- Web address: <https://www.barrierreef.org/what-we-do/projects/resilient-reefs>

Fundación Tierra Austral

Chile Conservation Corridor is demonstrating a new model for conservation in Chile by using Chile's new private lands protection tool, the Derecho Real de Conservación that will help achieve conservation goals within a corridor of Chile-Mediterranean habitat.

- Web address: <https://www.fundaciontierraaustral.cl/en/projects/>

Rainforest Alliance

LandScale is a global framework to generate trusted landscape-level insights that can align and incentivize local and global action to deliver sustainability at scale.

- Web address: <https://www.landscape.org/>

The Nature Conservancy

Valdivian Coastal Reserve is protecting one of the largest areas of temperate rainforest in Chile and is managed as a model for private conservation in Chile.

- Web address: <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/latin-america/chile/valdivian-coastal-reserve/>





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