



Visibility Under Pressure

Social media, resource scarcity
and strategic communication
in civil society

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INTRODUCTION

"Communication itself becomes a central organizational and political challenge."

Social media has become a central infrastructure of public communication. For civil society organizations, migrant associations, educational initiatives and advocacy networks, it increasingly functions not merely as an optional communication channel, but as an essential space for visibility, networking, mobilization and political positioning.

At the same time, the growing importance of digital communication confronts organizations with significant structural challenges: rising communicative expectations, accelerated publication cycles, platform dependencies and limited organizational resources.

This tension is particularly evident among migrant and grassroots-oriented organizations. Many work with small teams, project-based and temporary funding, fragmented communication structures and high political expectations (Nah and Saxton 2012; Liegel, Southerland and Baker 2019; Thomas and Duffett 2024).

Visibility has long ceased to be an optional add-on for civil society organizations; it is part of democratic infrastructure.

Public visibility is often taken for granted, while the institutional conditions for professional communication are frequently absent. The increasing platformization of social communication further intensifies these developments.

The communication problems of civil society organizations can rarely be reduced to technical deficits. Rather, they emerge from broader structural conditions that shape contemporary civil society work in Germany. Communication itself thus becomes a central organizational and political challenge.

This policy brief therefore examines the growing importance of digital communication for civil society organizations and outlines key organizational, political and strategic implications. It argues that communication should no longer be understood as a downstream or purely operational function, but as a central infrastructural dimension of democratic participation and organizational sustainability.

Looking ahead, the challenges posed by artificial intelligence and the increasing automation of communicative processes are moving to the forefront. AI will significantly accelerate research, text production, translation, design, monitoring and evaluation, thereby opening up new possibilities for organizations with limited resources.

At the same time, it will fundamentally change public communication: when content can be produced ever more quickly, cheaply and at scale, what matters is not only the quantity of publications, but their credibility, stance and recognizable grounding in real social relationships.

CORE ARGUMENT

- Digital visibility is increasingly a prerequisite for legitimacy, networking and political positioning.
- At the same time, many organizations work under conditions of structural resource scarcity.
- Strategic communication must therefore be understood as an infrastructural task.
- Platform logics can enable participation, but they can also narrow political complexity.

1. THE PLATFORMIZATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY COMMUNICATION

Social media has developed into a dominant social medium across age groups and social milieus. According to the ARD/ZDF Media Study 2025, around 59 percent of 16- to 74-year-olds in Germany actively use social media, while use is also continuously increasing among older population groups (ARD/ZDF Research Commission 2025).

For civil society actors, this development has several consequences. First, public communication increasingly takes place within privately organized digital infrastructures governed by algorithmic mechanisms of visibility. Communication is no longer shaped solely by political relevance or institutional authority, but also by platform-specific dynamics such as interaction metrics, publication frequencies, audiovisual formats and attention economies.

Research on the platformization of political communication indicates that visibility is increasingly structured by technical and commercial logics (Obar, Zube and Lampe 2012; Santos Junior 2020; Etter and Albu 2020).

Second, organizations are increasingly expected to maintain a continuous digital presence. Visibility itself becomes a prerequisite for legitimacy, funding opportunities, stakeholder relations and public recognition. Communication therefore no longer merely complements organizational work - it becomes part of that work.

Third, platformization changes the temporal structure of civil society communication. Many organizations experience growing pressure toward immediacy, permanent responsiveness and accelerated production cycles. Smaller organizations in particular are thereby caught in tensions between political depth and communicative speed.

Many organizations possess strong professional and political expertise, yet lack the infrastructural conditions needed to translate their work into sustainable public communication over time. As a result, communication is often organized reactively rather than strategically.

2. COMMUNICATION UNDER CONDITIONS OF RESOURCE SCARCITY

Civil society organizations are thus increasingly confronted with a contradiction between communicative expectations and organizational capacities. On the one hand, professional communication is expected; on the other, many organizations work under conditions of financial uncertainty, temporary project funding and limited human resources.

This affects communication work in different ways:

- communication responsibility is often distributed across different teams rather than being institutionally anchored;
- strategic communication is overshadowed by operational urgency;
- editorial continuity is difficult to maintain;
- platform-specific skills are unevenly distributed;
- long-term communication planning is replaced by reactive publication practices.

In practice, many communication teams simultaneously handle design, editing, moderation, strategy, public relations, event communication and stakeholder coordination. The result is often communicative fragmentation rather than coherent public positioning.

Under these conditions, low-threshold digital tools such as Canva or automated planning systems such as Buffer gain importance. They can relieve organizations with limited resources and simplify certain communicative processes.

Technological accessibility alone, however, cannot resolve structural inequalities. Professional communication requires time, continuity, institutional memory and stable organizational processes. If these foundations are missing, communication work risks remaining permanently reactive and unsustainable.

3. MIGRANT ORGANIZATIONS AND DIGITAL PUBLICS

Social media plays a particularly important role for migrant organizations. Digital platforms often function as spaces of counter-public visibility in contexts where migrant perspectives remain underrepresented or distorted in traditional media.

Studies on media use also show that people with a migration history often use digital media intensively for political information and social orientation (Elis 2025). This creates important potential for community-oriented communication, political education and participatory engagement. At the same time, these spaces remain structurally unequal.

Organizations working on issues such as racism, migration, anti-discrimination or social justice often operate under conditions of increased digital hostility. Hate speech, coordinated harassment, doxing and

online intimidation increasingly shape everyday communicative work.

Digital security is therefore not merely a technical question, but an integral component of organizational and anti-discrimination strategies.

This points to a broader transformation of political communication: digital visibility enables both participation and exposure. Organizations become more visible, but at the same time more vulnerable to surveillance, hostility and reputational attacks.

Smaller organizations in particular, often lacking legal or institutional protection mechanisms, can be significantly affected in their communication behavior, in the wellbeing of their staff members and in their political positioning.

4. PLATFORM LOGICS AND THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

Digital visibility is not distributed neutrally. Different platforms shape communication styles, audience interactions and strategic possibilities for action in their own specific ways. Research on digital publics shows that algorithmic platforms systematically privilege certain forms of communication (Obar, Zube and Lampe 2012).

Algorithms privilege in particular:

- emotional intensity over complexity;
- speed over reflection;
- personalization over institutional discourse;
- audiovisual immediacy over differentiated analysis.

As a result, civil society organizations increasingly adapt their communication practices to platform incentives. Political messages are no longer

determined solely by organizational priorities, but also by the technical requirements of digital visibility.

Effective communication therefore depends less and less on individual posts than on organizational coherence, strategic planning and long-term communicative infrastructure. Narratives, understanding of target groups, editorial continuity and institutional clarity gain importance.

This gives rise to several tensions:

- educational depth versus platform brevity;
- political differentiation versus algorithmic simplification;
- sustainable communication versus output pressure;
- institutional credibility versus performative visibility.

5. BEYOND THE DEMOCRATIZATION NARRATIVE

Social media is often associated with promises of democratization, participation and accessibility. Although digital platforms have undoubtedly enabled new forms of visibility and networking, the relationship between online communication and political transformation remains limited. Research on digital activism indicates that online visibility alone rarely leads to sustainable institutional change (Obar, Zube and Lampe 2012).

Digital communication can strengthen symbolic presence, create spaces of belonging and make issues visible. Online visibility alone, however, does not automatically translate into institutional power, political change or material redistribution.

Political participation in digital spaces remains shaped by:

- unequal access to resources;
- platform monopolies;
- algorithmic concentration;
- linguistic hierarchies;
- communicative precarity.

For civil society actors, this means that digital communication should not be understood as a substitute for long-term organizing, institutional alliance-building or political infrastructure.

Rather, social media communication develops its effect above all when it is embedded in broader organizational and political strategies.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

For civil society organizations, strategic communication does not mean being permanently present on every platform. What matters is understanding communication as a plannable infrastructure: with clear responsibilities, realistic routines, protected resources and a recognizable political stance.

The following recommendations are aimed at organizations that want to make their communication more strategic, resilient and credible despite limited resources. They do not begin with maximum output, but with organizational clarity, sustainable processes and reliable relationships.

INSTITUTIONALLY ANCHOR COMMUNICATION

Communication should not be treated as an additional task for individual staff members. Organizations need fixed responsibilities, simple approval processes, editorial planning and a shared understanding of which topics, target groups and narratives are priorities.

USE AI AND AUTOMATION SELECTIVELY

AI tools can support research, drafts, translations, summaries, editorial planning and monitoring. They should, however, be used as support - not as a replacement for political judgment, community knowledge or human review.

PLAN RESOURCES REALISTICALLY

Not every organization needs daily posts or a presence on every platform. More useful are a few reliable formats: for example, a monthly focus topic, recurring explanatory formats, event communication, newsletters or targeted community outreach.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

STRENGTHEN AUTHENTICITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

The more content is produced automatically, the more important credibility, recognizable authorship and real relationships become. Political communication should not only generate output, but build trust, recognizability and proximity to communities.

CHANGE FUNDING LOGICS

Funders and policymakers should recognize communication as eligible infrastructure. Professional public relations, digital security, translation, accessibility and knowledge management are not incidental costs, but prerequisites for democratic participation.

CONSIDER DIGITAL SECURITY

Organizations working on migration, racism or social justice need protection concepts for hate speech, doxing, coordinated attacks and crisis communication. Digital security is part of strategic public relations.

Strategic communication does not emerge from better tools alone. It presupposes that organizations connect their public relations work with protection, participation and institutional continuity. Especially for migrant and grassroots-oriented organizations, visibility is always also a question of security, trust and political agency.

This shifts the perspective: the focus is not on individual posts, campaigns or tools, but on whether organizations have the structural conditions to make their work visible, understandable and effective over time.

STRATEGIC CONCLUSION

The growing importance of digital communication cannot be separated from the broader conditions under which civil society organizations currently operate. Visibility, communication and public positioning are increasingly expected as self-evident organizational capacities, while the resources required to sustain them are often unstable or absent.

For migrant and grassroots-oriented organizations, this contradiction is especially pronounced. Their work frequently depends on political trust, community knowledge, multilingual communication and protection from hostility. Digital platforms may amplify this work, but they can also expose organizations to new vulnerabilities and pressures.

The central strategic task is therefore not to produce more content at any cost. It is to build communicative infrastructure that is realistic, resilient and politically grounded. This includes editorial routines, clear responsibilities, digital safety practices, human review, community relationships and a funding logic that recognizes communication as part of democratic participation.

In the coming years, AI and automation will further intensify these questions. They can reduce burdens and expand access, but they also make credibility, authorship and organizational judgment more important than ever. Civil society communication will remain effective only where visibility is connected to trust, protection and long-term political strategy.

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