

# COMMUNICATING WITH THE MEDIA / COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC

When citizens, civic initiatives or non-profit organizations wish to fulfill their mission, win allies and start change, they may find various tools helpful. They include also communication with the media and with the public.

In this chapter, when we write about working with the media and the public, we will understand this to mean:

1. **“Traditional” communication with the media** – presentation of oneself, one’s own ideas or a non-profit organization through traditional forms by, and for example, issuing press releases, organizing press conferences, giving interviews or making appearances on radio or on TV shows.
2. **Communication with social media** – using the Internet, social networks and new means of communication, connected to new information technologies and strategies.
3. **Direct communication with the public** – this communication happens in various formats and face-to-face with people – the public. Although it is not happening through the media, we consider it a very strong tool that cannot be avoided, if we wish to influence the public.

Before we describe how to get ready, what to use and what to be careful about in this area, let us first ask what role non-profit organizations should take in the public and how they should communicate with them.

## **Image of a nonprofit organization in the media / the public**

Nonprofit organizations may choose various strategies to achieve visibility.

- Some organizations want to achieve visibility in any way (even provocatively) and to draw attention in line with the saying: “There is no such thing as bad publicity.”
- There are organizations, which create innovative forms of communication but have no content to offer because they lack vision in their programs and have nothing with which to fill their mission.
- Some NGOs decide to ignore the media. They are convinced that “journalists are not going to write anything good anyway” and they are protective of information that they have available. They consider their values to be so deep that they

believe it makes no sense to try and let other understand them. Sometimes they even claim they have not adopted new ways of communication because of a lack of time for it.

- However, more and more organizations who listen to the public can be seen, and they respond to input from outside and use the most modern tools to send their message to key audiences and start a dialogue with them.

Every nonprofit organization or association, will have to answer for itself questions such as **Who are we? What goals do we wish to achieve?** And **What communication tools do we wish to use towards those goals?** Yet, no organization can succeed in the long run if it lacks a vision, if it focuses exclusively on form (rather than content) or if it decides to stay closed to the surrounding world.

## Why communicate with the media

Communication with the media and citizens (directly and through traditional or social media) should – as a tool – allow a nonprofit organization to:

- **Receive feedback** from diverse target groups,
- **Communicate its mission** (what we do, why and what it is that we wish to achieve) effectively (understandably and convincingly),
- **Demonstrate** through specific practical examples **one's experience, competencies, attitudes, and values** – i.e. one's capability to be an active and visible influencer – for example, the ability to work strategically, the ability to implement one's program and project in practice, the ability to build coalitions with other organizations, and the ability to motivate people.
- **Lead discussion or specific dialogue** in those topics in which the NGO is active.

Whoever wishes to communicate effectively with the media and the public should pay attention to:

- **Formulating content**, rather than just using specific forms or methods. Without clear values or a formulated mission or program vision, communication is not sustainable in the long run.
- **Interactive communication** – receiving feedback and cultivating open dialogue, not just one-sided communication and influencing target groups.
- **Diverse mixture of communication formats** and use of multiple **communication channels**, because that is the only way to reach diverse audiences.

We are not going to work with trendy words here such as **positioning, reputation management, corporate identity, or marketing**. We also do not wish to cover **advertising**, or the use of billboards or active participation in tabloid-type media, because NGOs are able to find ways to work more effectively without limiting themselves to using only advertising and marketing tools.

## Formulating a program

**An NGO program** might be a relatively short and brief document showing clearly what is important to the organization, in what area it works and what it wants to achieve in that area. The program might also define **strategies and tools** to fulfil the program vision or spell out **process values** (values guiding the organization in achieving its goals, such as transparency, dialogue, consulting the public, and other<sup>1</sup>):

*"They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself," wrote Andy Warhol in The Philosophy.*

The closer to the level of the community, the more specific and tangible NGO programs and activities might be; their complexity rises as they move to higher levels or even nation-wide impact. Many organization members still fail to realize that such materials are not only essential tools making it possible to impact the public but they are also strategic tools for managing their own activities through vision (several approaches to managing people use so-called "**vision-driven leadership**" in business, public, as well as non-profit sectors). The defined program, or mission, is a roadmap which allows us to always keep in mind where we are going and it shows us whether we did not get sidetracked from it. It also allows us to share our goals. *"There's nothing more demoralizing than a leader who can't clearly articulate why we're doing what we're doing,"* wrote two well-known authors on leadership, James Kouzes and Barry Posner. A leader with nothing to say is unable to motivate or lead people.



<sup>1</sup> A well-known slogan "Not to be afraid and not to steal" is ascribed to Tomáš G. Masaryk.

By defining where an NGO wants to go, **a clear mission** also allows for strategic approach to fulfilling a specific program. If the vision takes into account also thorough mapping and articulation of the present conditions, then it will be much easier to choose t

he tools to bridge the gap between we are starting from and where we want to get.

*"Vision works not only as an indicator of direction, but also as the cement which helps transform values into actions, visions into realities and obstacles into innovations."* (Paraphrased quotation of James Kouzes)

Program and other documents available to the public have also other significance: they make it possible **to confront competitors** with their plans, they allow for competition of ideas and approaches. At present we are rather used to the fact that the watchdog function is taken by nonprofit organizations and civic associations with access to noteworthy information.

In the following section, we are going to inspect various approaches to **communication with the public**, whether through media or directly with various target groups. For each of the forms listed one may find a number of materials directly on the web. In more demanding projects it is possible to work with experienced consultants. Therefore we are not going to give detailed descriptions of individual forms or provide checklists of whether an NGO did the right steps when issuing a press release or publishing an article on its blog. Rather we focus on overall description of a given form, including its strategic significance and the most important aspects to pay attention to when using such form.

## **Traditional forms of communicating with the media**

By traditional forms we understand such tools and methods which are connected to traditional print and electronic (radio, TV) media. Predominantly, they include a **press release, press conference, briefing, interview, TV or radio discussion, and a roundtable**. Other common formats include promotional materials, press kits, information e-mails and bulletins, but also lectures or field trips.

### **Press release**

The goal of the press release is to inform the public through the media that something important has happened or is happening. The release should include all relevant data – hard facts (context, event, place, time, people involved...). Even though it is said that a press release should not be subjective, the selection itself of a topic and emphasis on specific information express clear attitudes and values. The figure below shows a clear structure of a press release (invitation of a planned event).

<b>Header, logo</b>			<i>Distinctive visual arrangement might attract attention and become your signal flag. If you fail to include to whom the release/fax is addressed, it may end up in the trash.</i>
		<b>Recipient</b>	
<b>WHAT</b>	<b>MESSAGE</b>		<i>The body of the release / announcement is the essential part. Write it in a way which makes it worth reading.</i>
<b>WHO</b>	<i>prepares the event, who organizes it and who will attend it</i>		
<b>WHERE</b>	<i>location the event will take place; venue</i>		
<b>WHEN</b>	<i>time, duration</i>		
<b>HOW</b>	<i>program, agenda</i>		
<b>WHY</b>	<i>why is it important?</i>		
<b>ATTACHMENTS</b>		<b>Signature</b>	
<b>CONTACT</b>			<i>Contact information makes it possible to verify the message. Provide a person who is competent and can be easily reached.</i>

## Press conference / Briefing

The goal of a press conference is to communicate as effectively as possible such information which is at the moment important to you but also to the media. Organize a press conference only when you truly have something to say and when a press conference is the most suitable means to achieve what you want to achieve. Do not forget that you are the one who is proactive and offer information you choose at the place that you determine. (Naturally, a press conference is a suitable form also when response is required to specific events such as newly passed law, voiced accusations etc.).

- What do you wish to achieve with the press conference? With what information and conviction should journalists be leaving the conference?
- What needs to be done for journalists to come?

Your answers to the questions should determine the choice of the topic, the time and place, agenda of the press conference and how it is moderated, the ratio of space for providing information and for live interviews and support materials; consider also non-traditional forms of press conferences.

## Interview

If someone contacted you to offer to do an interview, it means you are perceived as a person with something to say. To communicate in real time and spontaneously has its advantages and disadvantages but it is always true that many questions from journalists can be predicted and that the interview – particularly in print – may be authorized.

Again ask the questions:

- For what medium are we doing the interview?
- Will the interview be broadcast live or recorded?
- It is a respectable medium which will make it possible to authorize the interview?
- In what role do we wish to present ourselves? What competencies do we wish to show?
- Who will be the reader or the listener?
- What key words will I be using and what arguments?
- What position shall I take? Shall I be for something or against something?
- How do I manage to link generalities with specific examples?

## Television and radio show

Television or radio discussions or shows are important forms for presenting oneself and providing information. Not everyone deals with such a topic to make appearance in nation-wide media but target groups may be addressed also through local media or internet television or radio. If we are not invited into a panel discussion, there are other formats for our possible media appearance (news, documentary films, entertainment shows, morning shows...).

Discussions in electronic media allow for confrontation through arguments and we should be ready for it not just in terms of presenting our visions but also in terms of predicting what questions we will be asked. We should be able to handle pressure from or a lack of professionalism of the show host.

**When preparing**, ask yourself these questions:

- How do we want others to perceive us – as being conciliatory or confrontational?
- Do we wish to come across as experts or ordinary people?
- How much space do we wish to take?
- How do we get ready for arguments to be presented?
- How do we deal with the set time limit?

Experience tells us that an essential skill such as communicating with the media is not just an ability **to express one's thoughts** but also **to listen** – at the level of content (what others are saying) as well as at the level of process (how we talk, who attacks whom, what power conflict is going on explicitly or implicitly, and what unvoiced interests influence the discussion).

Also of significance is the ability of a person to harmonize a **rational message** with **emotional message**, particularly when we realize that people (also those in the audience) make decisions using partly their cortex (grey matter of the brain) but also their limbic system (where emotions reside). The ability to recognize emotions of others as well as one's own emotions and the ability to work with them are the elemental starting points for protecting oneself from manipulation because, as German scientist and satirist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg once said, "*The most*

*dangerous of all falsehoods is a slightly distorted truth*". It is thanks to the recognition of emotional signals that we come to be aware of developing manipulation. However, work with emotions need not focus solely on defense but we may use positive emotions also to make our message stronger.

The preceding text emphasized mostly **proactive creation of content** (what we wish to publicize and have time to prepare). Situations have not yet been mentioned when an immediate response is required to **media** attacks, whether based on true or false information. The whole area of protection of personal reputation or personal data or use of press legislation or the right to respond is so complex that it needs to be consulted with experts or experienced people as needed. If you are a strong opponent, it may happen that others will not fight you on the ground of your arguments but they will focus on the use of legislation.

## **New forms of working with the media**

With the onset of new information and communication technologies and their growing use by the public more and more people are realizing the opportunities that are open to them. In many countries this fact is pointed out by independent institutions which recommend governments and politicians to respond to it.

*In 2007, the British government was advised by Ed Mayo, former Chief Director of the British National Consumer Council and Tom Steinberg, Founder and Director of mySociety, to make use of the importance of internet communities and to:*

- *Work with users and owners of websites in fulfilling joint social and economic goals,*
- *Supply innovators using government data is needed so that it benefits all citizens, and*
- *Protect public interest by preparing citizens to deal with world overflowing with information (sometimes inaccessible) and help excluded groups use such information.*

One need not immediately jump onto every new trend in social media but it is important to be able to communicate with the public any changes and to choose the tools that will make communication easier and more effective. The importance of social behaviour became apparent during the Arab Spring when new technological tools helped mobilize the public.

In this section, we are going to describe options for using the following social tools:

- **Websites of organizations and individuals, internet portals, and blogs**
- **Social networks (*Twitter, Facebook*)**
- **Media research and communication assessment**

## **Websites of organizations and individuals, internet portals, and blogs**

**Websites** of organizations or individuals are now part of regular business as they provide them with their own space to present programs, projects and activities. The question which now remains is to what degrees do these websites serve to promote (propaganda) and to what degree do they truly inform audiences. Further, what information comfort and interaction (including feedback) can they provide? Besides websites, **civic portals** might also be of interest because they bring together alternative information into a specific town or area. These can be incredibly useful if these websites also contain interesting applications to point out and links among various pieces of information because they can help readers position themselves in a complex world, and help to mobilize them.

The owner of any website should be aware that the most important thing to be achieved is building a community of loyal and active users. That is a phenomenon for which millions are paid (*Google* could have programmed a better website than youtube.com but it purchased it instead because millions of users were used to visiting the *YouTube* site to watch their videos). A community of users will be created only where there are interesting opinions, live interactions, and where something noteworthy, inspiring or controversial happens every day (and it need not be newly created material but can be discussions on web pieces). Such a community will be created where the user has adequate tools to get involved.

Similar to online video streaming platforms like *YouTube*, **blogs** are also a lively option. They present the author's profile, his/her involvements, their opinions and clearly illustrate their argumentation style. A series of blog posts with follow-up discussions will give the reader a clear view of the main objectives that are trying to be achieved. All around the world there are examples of bloggers who have had an impact on significant issues. Thanks to them, organizations acquired more transparent information, ineffective contracts have been discovered and revoked, citizens have been encouraged into action before elections, environmental or social laws have been changed, information has been spread, and people have been educated. Blogs can be run not only by individuals but also by organizations.

Yet, even an organization that does not believe in website building or web community development, should check and see what information about it is available online to an inquiring citizen or a journalist. Such "Google searching" is truly the bare minimum every publicly active entity must do.

### **Social networks (*Twitter, Facebook*)**

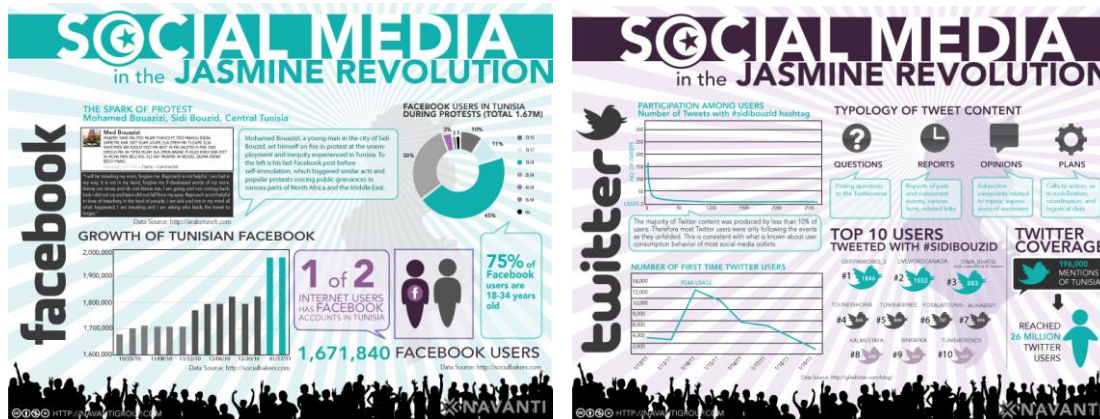
Social networks are being used more and more in the area of political communication and political marketing. Several authors have argued that Barack Obama's victory in 2008 U.S presidential election, was due in large to the use of social networks and grassroots supporters. Social media is becoming a major tool for communicating with people also outside of election campaigns and political fights. They are important for



building relations with the media or impacting public decisions, as was seen most recently with the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa.

Among the best known social networks in the world are **Twitter** and **Facebook**. **Twitter** is a social network and micro-blogging service with nearly 500 million users, which allows individuals to exchange 140-character long posts (tweets).

**Facebook** is an extensive web system<sup>2</sup> with over 1 billion active users, whose main purpose is creating networks and communication among users, for sharing multimedia, maintaining connections and for entertainment. Besides personal pages, thematic or interest-based group pages can also be created. Further, it also allows one to organize events, disseminate information and engage supporters.



Social networks make it possible to build up a fan base, strengthen group cohesion and a sense of belonging but they also allow specific applications. For example, quick mobilization of supporters; creating invitations to events; posting articles; and embedding multimedia content. If an organization tries to address younger or more educated target groups, it would be a grave mistake to not use social media. Internet usage is spread widely amongst target groups which may include regular visitors or discussion participants.

There are many ways to work with content on **Facebook**, and how to build a base of supporters. What is important are regular actions, authenticity and openness to two-way dialogue. Naturally, it is important that what you make public is found to be of interest to people so they wish to share it further.

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia

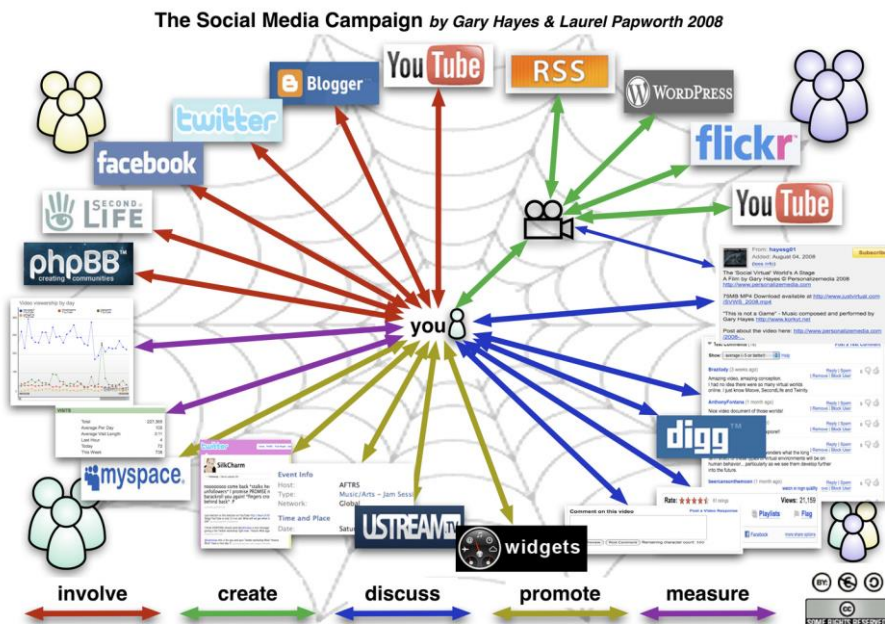
UPWORTHY

## First, Let's Define "Viral."

Shares per View	Clicks per Share	Viral?
LOW	LOW	nope
HIGH	LOW	kinda?
LOW	HIGH	not so much
HIGH	HIGH	Hell Yeah!

If people click and don't share, you lose.  
 If people share, but their friends don't click, you lose.  
 Ergo, your content must be really shareable and clickable.

Gary Hayes and Laurel Papworth developed a clear visual of how social media are being used. The chart makes it clear that various types of new media provide various functions and various levels of interaction. Some serve mostly for engaging public, others for presentation and promotion, and additional tools for dialogue and a collection of suggestions. Creating one's own multimedia content also happens more and more frequently. Besides using [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), there have been attempts also to start internet television channels.



We could further mention other, sometimes marginal, but entertaining ways of communicating through the internet – e.g. **Google Bombing** in which we post links so that searching for specific content brings up a specific phrase.

For a comprehensive view, we need to ask the following question: how can individual media be interconnected strategically and how to avoid the common mistake made by people who **still see** many tools **in isolation** when we should see a synergy effect?

Many organizations start a **Facebook** group, create a page or start blogging but only a fraction of them is able to integrate, interconnect or use these tools in a coordinated manner. The most effective way is to make a sort of **communication cocktail** (from newspaper articles to web page or an online blog to public meetings or face-to-face door-to-door meetings), which is balanced out to achieve your desired goals.

In addition to the mixture of various media, one must also determine how content will be provided on a daily basis at **Facebook**. More active organizations should post one to two status updates each day and vary the type of information offered (current news on implemented activities, photographs, awareness building, expressing thanks to members etc.). Another great challenge is also how to make your fans active and how to “draw” them out of the virtual world and into the world of specific activities. Communicate with your readers, offer them ways to get involved, use polls, ask them to share content, and turn to them for help, etc.

The key is to find out which cocktail is the most appetizing – using the idea of **CRM – customer relationship management**, which started to spread from business where it was born into the worlds of politics and activism. It involves systematic management of relationships and interactions with clients, based on mapping and analysis of information about clients. Key elements are known from common political practice – developing address books of members and fans. It is important to know how people respond to our communication through the media.

## **Media surveys**

Using new **mapping and analytical systems** is interesting from the perspective of acquiring and evaluating data. How to orient oneself in a world overflowing with information? How to distill from them what we need – or how to get feedback on how the media perceives us?

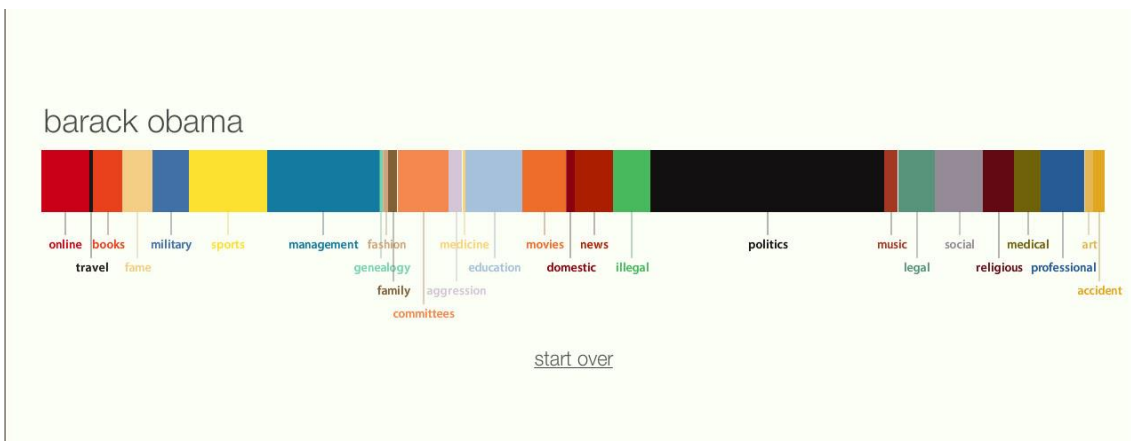
In addition to traditional theme-based monitoring of the media which is provided as a full service by a number of companies, new approaches also appear. The latest trends in **information management** talk about **results visualization**. This mode of communicating information breaks through human brain’s perception barrier – while we read texts at the speed of 200 bytes per second, we perceive images at the speed of 10 megabytes per second (that is why we are able to find our way through images much faster than through words and sentences). The examples below could be seen sometimes as more of art or a game than information output to be taken seriously – yet the listed tools offer an interesting view of a person and his/her production (verbal expressions and information put on the internet).

Of some interest is the visual representation of key themes and words using the tool [www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net). The images below contain key words used in inauguration speeches of former U.S President George W. Bush (left) and current President Barack Obama (right).



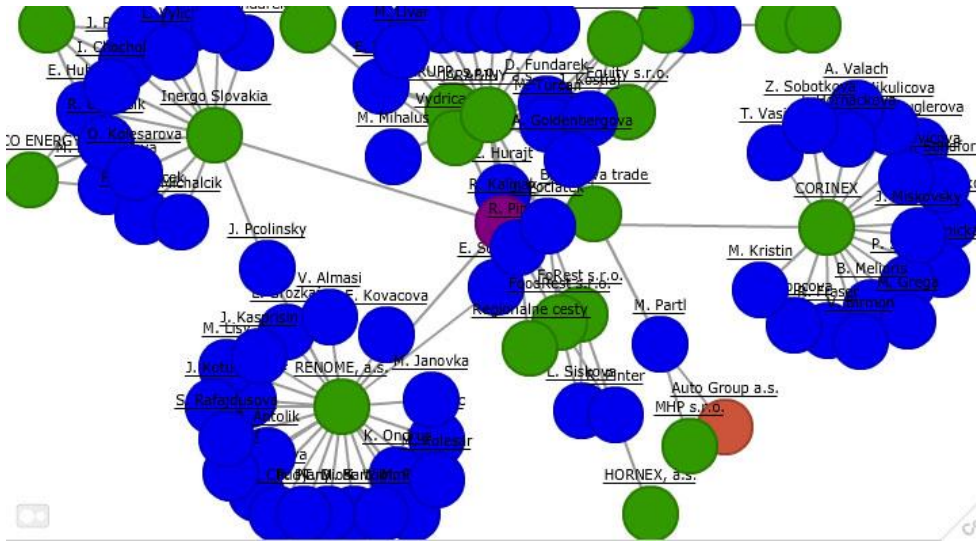
**New analytical technologies** in sociological research have been used also by the team of Barack Obama to search for undecided voters ([http://technet.idnes.cz/barack-obama-pouzil-specialni-program-pro-hledani-nerozhodnutych-volicu-1qz-/software.asp?c=A081105\\_123625\\_software\\_kuz](http://technet.idnes.cz/barack-obama-pouzil-specialni-program-pro-hledani-nerozhodnutych-volicu-1qz-/software.asp?c=A081105_123625_software_kuz)). That topic is discussed in the next section.

Web application Personas shows how the internet sees a specific person (using a comprehensive visualization of aggregated data available on the internet <http://personas.media.mit.edu/>).

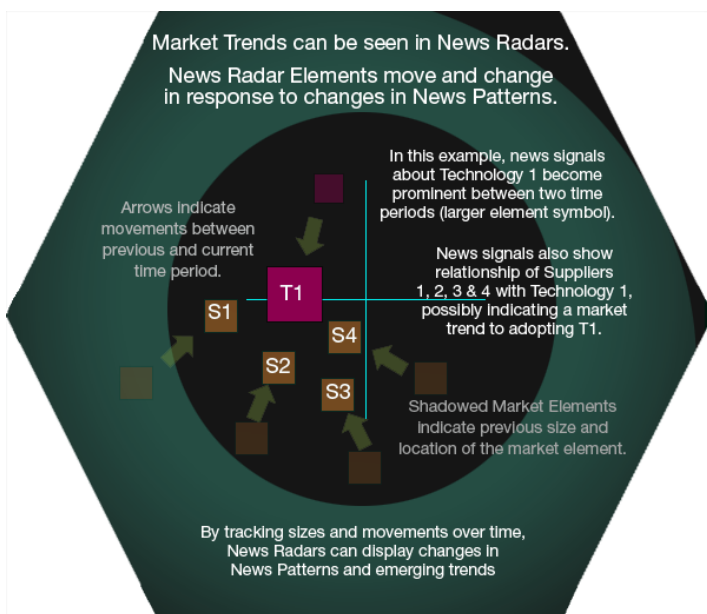


It is not a bad thing to have a look from time to time on how the internet perceives us or how we are seen by pages designed to give public comparisons under certain parameters. Pages dedicated to an anti-corruption feature a database of data collected from various sources on who wins public procurement contracts, where state finances are spent, who administers public finances at various levels or who the advisors to public officials are (e.g. from Slovakia: <http://www.fair-play.sk/zoznamy/hladaj.php>).

To better understand the economic connections, one can use the website [www.foaf.sk](http://www.foaf.sk) based on the Commercial Registry of Slovakia, which produces textual as well as visual results.



In addition to acquiring information about one's own organization, it is also important to get an overview of what is happening around the world. The visually based **News Patterns Network** – [www.newspatterns.com](http://www.newspatterns.com) – offers a systematic analysis of media news, making it easier for the subscriber to get insights and understand context or trends. Graphical interface allows businessmen, politicians or other leaders to see the world of the media as an animated radar which defines relations, scope and significance of millions of pieces of information (in a much more sophisticated way, this system replaces human thinking which uses intuition and holistic views). If organizations are able to identify important issues and areas of interest to the public, they will be to respond in their communication in a more targeted way.



While previous tools talk about mapping external media (and external trends), it is also good to use tools which allow you to monitor the **effectiveness of your own media** (e.g. blog, website). There are a number of such tools available – One example is **Google Analytics**, which tracks your traffic sources, topics of interest, the time they spent on your pages and how the visitors move from one page to another.



## New forms of communication with the citizens

Trends towards the emancipation of citizens, growing disillusionment over the gap between developments in society and the real needs and interests of people, perceived crisis of representational democracy and growing popularity of direct democracy, as well as pressure on greater transparency of politics or the use of expertise among regular people – all of these create conditions also for direct communication with citizens and the public, and not just communication through the media.

This can include:

- **Field trips, canvassing, field polling** (face-to-face communication based on personal contact with individuals or smaller groups of people),
- **Discussions, public hearings, citizen cafés** - meetings with larger groups of people

- **Long-term consultation and participation processes** involving citizens, nonprofit organizations or interest groups, for example when creating some documents, concept papers, public spaces, etc.

Direct face-to-face communication may be time consuming but it gives space for convincing audiences in direct contact. **Canvassing** is a tool used in the long run in the United States – it relates to systematic efforts to initiate direct contact with individuals, particularly during campaigns ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canvassing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canvassing)).

**Discussion forums preceding elections, public discussions and hearings** are interesting but demanding ways in which to inform the public, consult the public or to engage the public in decision-making. While discussions are aimed at presenting the opinions of participants in a structured format, public discussions allow for greater interaction, facilitated exchange of questions and answers, and live dialogue. The most interesting format, which is used little in Slovakia, are **public hearings**. It is aimed at mapping public opinions on a specific topic. Politicians and experts are those who listen to what the public has to say or at most ask exploratory questions.

Some noteworthy types of public meetings have been appearing in recent years – they have so far been used by the nonprofit sector or some business companies. They use creative and informal atmospheres to receive from the participants a number of suggestions or comments when discussing specific issues (**World Café, Open Space, BarCamp**, etc.).

**Long-term consultation processes** (consulting with NGOs, participating in the development of strategic planning processes, or programming conferences) are some of the most demanding yet meaningful tools. The creation of various strategies, policies or frameworks almost always call for engaging the public (laymen and experts alike), who are capable of contributing their own experience and knowledge.

All types of public meetings and participation processes require careful preparation, involvement of experienced facilitators (people leading the process), time, and energy. However, when politicians have personal experience with such processes, they typically **change their perception of the public** from seeing it as laymen to seeing it as partners with something to offer.

## Conclusion

The topic of non-profit organizations communicating with the media and the public would not be fully covered if we failed to mention the duties and responsibilities connected to the role of these NGOs (in addition to their opportunities to influence the media). If anyone decides to be active in public life, they must be aware that the media may follow them in great detail. It will be up to him/her to decide what to do so that the created image is clear, legible, and positive. Someone wise commented that *media can either make us or break us* and to that I can only add: depending on what opportunities we give them.

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