

Evaluating The Impact of Digital Technologies on Volunteer Engagement

Publication Date: 11 September 2023.

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Introduction

Over the course of the last decade digital technologies have revolutionised volunteer engagement. The proliferation of digital platforms, such as social media, and the internet, have provided new avenues through which individuals can connect, share information, and crucially engage with causes that they care about. This has impacted both the ways through which non-profits and volunteer organisations operate but has also transformed the way new volunteers are recruited, motivated and mobilised. This report aims to evaluate the impact of digital technologies on volunteer engagement with a specific focus on understanding the benefits, challenges, and opportunities that arise from the integration of digital tools in the management of volunteers. In exploring this intersection between technology and volunteering, this report will uncover the ways through which digital technologies enhance volunteer engagement, empower volunteers, and seek to create lasting impacts within communities.

The research will begin by offering comprehensive evaluation of the literature that exists on the subject, seeking to explore relevant trends and developments over the course of recent years. As a continuation, the report will look at the modern landscape of digital technologies within the volunteering sector drawing the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) resource base to aid in; dissecting existing case studies, scholarly articles and reports that help paint a picture of the modern environment of volunteer engagement. The report will then explore the CEV's use of digital technologies within its work, exploring the benefits and pitfalls of various digital platforms and tools, hoping to identify best practices and strategies that enable organisations to make effective use of digital technologies for volunteer engagement.

Literature Review

To construct an effective analysis and evaluation of the use of modern digital technologies on engagement in volunteer activities both in Europe and further afield, it is important to provide a review of the literature surrounding the rapid advancement of digital technologies in the volunteer sector. This literature review will aim to explore existing research and scholarly articles that evaluate the impact of digital technologies on volunteer engagement. The literature review and subsequent evaluation will aim to explore the development of such digital technologies in volunteering within the context of the last 30 years, since the emergence of the "Dot-Com Bubble" in 1993. Because this point is widely regarded as the beginning of the digital landscape as it is known today (Goodnight and Green, 2010).

Digital tools are used by volunteer networks as a way of recruiting, organising, and mobilising volunteers, keeping them motivated with new projects as well as having them participate in volunteer efforts remotely.

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There are a variety of digital tools available to aid in both the management of volunteering as well as engaging in volunteering itself, including social media platforms (Houston et al, 2014) and mobile applications (apps) and websites such as Dutch platforms “Ready2Help” (Schmidt et al, 2017) and “Social Care Network” with a combined reach of over 2 million people a year (Social Care Network, 2022) (Rode Kruis, 2023). There is some variation in the effectiveness of these two methods through which to encourage volunteer engagement. Social media has a wider reach than individual websites and applications, with Pew Research Centre (2021) estimating 70% of the U.S. population to be regular users of social media (Pew Research Centre, 2021) with that number being at least 57% within the European Union (Eurostat, 2021), as a result social media, with larger reach, has a greater ability to garner more attention to volunteer efforts than bespoke platforms such as Ready2Help.

However, there are pitfalls with using social media as a primary way of stimulating volunteer engagement. The principle being that social media services are not designed with volunteer engagement in mind, rather they are aimed at offering entertainment and news, as a result using them as a means of encouraging volunteer engagement is not necessarily effective. Often, content related to volunteering and volunteering projects does not gain as much engagement as these other forms of content, as it is not the platform’s primary purpose, and as a result does not have the same level of engagement and is then not promoted by the algorithms of such platforms (Kim, 2017). As Houston et al, found in their 2014 paper, due to the wide variety of different social media applications as well as differing uses, often volunteer specific accounts or pages can become inundated with information that is not relevant to the volunteer efforts which they seek to promote and organise. They use the example of a Facebook page aimed at supporting the victims of a Tornado disaster in the U.S, however due to the influx of users on the page, key information surrounding crucial events such as the location of clean up events, were lost due to the number of users posting to the page (Houston et al, 2014) (Poblet et al, 2013). In addition, many struggled to find the official account that information was being posted on because of a plurality of social media sites. This highlights, the ineffectiveness of social media platforms as a way of recruiting, organising, and conducting volunteering as the UI (User Interface) and mechanics of these platforms are not designed with volunteering or philanthropy in mind and as a result content in this area is often neglected.

In contrast to the use of social media as a way of conveying a volunteer organisations or individual’s message, another potential way to communicate is via specific volunteer platforms and mobile applications such as “Ready2Help” (Schmidt et al, 2017). Such applications and platforms are often co-opted by already established NGOs or governmental organisations, such as the Dutch Red Cross in the case of the Ready2Help platform.

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Applications and platforms such as these differ from social media as a way of encouraging volunteer engagement as they often offer a more centralised place for people to access volunteering opportunities. This places these platforms as more efficient and often more effective than volunteer efforts conducted purely via social media because of them acting as an interface between established, expanding and emergent forms of volunteer engagement; a stark contrast to the potentially poorly organised and often inefficient model of social media volunteer engagement (Schmidt et al, 2017). As a result, these volunteering platforms also negate the issue described previously of volunteer content being “lost” within social media which is not something that can happen on volunteer specific platforms as they are designed with volunteering in mind meaning that the “content” which is posted on the platform is directly relevant to an organisation’s volunteering organisation and programmes.

Another paper which highlights the effectiveness of volunteer platforms on volunteer engagement is from Chui and Chan (2019) who studied the role of modern platforms in reconfiguring the approach of non-profit organisations to the operation of their volunteer efforts. They interviewed staff from eight separate non-profit organisations and found that management of volunteers remotely and recruiting applications enabled organisations to enlarge and diversify both volunteer pools and levels of interest and engagement from potential volunteers. They articulate the effectiveness of such platforms for small scale non-profit organisation who have limited administrative resources, including limited staffing and ability to conduct marketing, volunteer recruitment and outreach. One of the respondents to Chui and Chan’s report contended that the adoption of a mobile-based volunteer platform had enabled the organisation to expand without the need to employ extra paid or professional staff, something that would not have been the case without the adoption of such a system.

Flaws and limitations of the dedicated volunteering platforms, as discussed, were also identified by Chui and Chan (2019), the principle of these highlighting that despite the ability of mobile applications to engage and increase the pool of volunteers, individual volunteer accountability was an area that lacked. Several of the non-profits studied contended that the ease of use and “signing up” to these applications led to an increase in no-shows and last minute dropouts, this is as a result of the click-of-a-button style layouts on many of these platforms, with many prospective volunteers could choosing to drop out or be noncommittal, whereas in the past it was more administratively burdensome to sign up to volunteer activities, meaning that the individuals who completed the process were more determined to commit to it. However, despite this, the advantages of the use of such platforms outweigh the issues that can come with them, due to more efficient recruiting, matching and managing features for volunteers and non-profits alike. With the adoption of digital technologies in the sphere of volunteering, there are risks that organisations are going to have to bear in order to make best use of modern digital volunteering infrastructures.

Case Study

The case study of Dutch volunteer organisation “Social Care Network” (CEV, 2022) can be used to provide insight into how digital technologies are revolutionising volunteer engagement, including the methods through which volunteers interact with hosts, the recruitment process, the encouragement of newcomers to volunteering projects and how this can align with the values of the CEV’s “Blueprint for European Volunteering”, 2030 (BEV2030) project. The “Social Care Network” is a digital platform that seeks to expand the scope of volunteering to a wide range of demographics. The platform acts as a hub from which potential volunteers can be matched with volunteering opportunities. It does this by collating available volunteering opportunities sourced from 70 different platforms, then matching volunteers with the most appropriate organisation in a timely manner (CEV, 2022). The “Social Care Network” has proved to be a major success in the Netherlands with 108,500 volunteers matched to opportunities in 2021, with 36% of them being newcomers to volunteering, highlighting the effectiveness of digital platforms in increasing volunteer engagement (CEV, 2022).

Another facet of volunteer engagement that the “Social Care Network” has been successful in fostering is the engagement of young people within volunteer opportunities. “Social Care Network” are attempting to alter the demographics of those who are involved in volunteering, aiming to engage more young people in volunteer efforts. This was a major success in 2021 with 54% of the people using their platform being aged under 40 and 25% being under the age of 25 (CEV, 2022). This is something that has been altering drastically due to the impact of Covid-19 which brought an estimated 60% increase in volunteer matches to the platform “NLvoorelkaar”, a part of “Social Care Network” in 2021, versus 2019. (Van Roosmalen, 2022).

As shown previously, organisations such as “Social Care Network” began to see great success in increasing volunteer engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic, a time during which there was a huge increase in compassion amongst the wider populous and their want to channel their compassion into volunteering efforts (Trautwein et al, 2020). The increased success of such organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic is largely as a result of the need to pivot into a form of online volunteering, wherein volunteering efforts were conducted solely over the internet as in-person interaction was limited. A study from Trautwein et al (2020) found that not only did online volunteering throughout the Covid-19 pandemic increase volunteer engagement but also increased volunteer retention with many of the volunteers who had began by volunteering online during the pandemic went on to continue volunteering in person once restrictions were lifted (Trautwein et al). This highlights that volunteer platforms such as these can be used in helping to increase volunteer retention in addition to engagement, helping to contribute to a hybrid volunteering environment where there is a symbiotic relationship between in-person volunteering and online volunteering ultimately demonstrating the success of digital technologies.

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The increase and prevalence of digital platforms engaging in volunteering and increasing volunteer engagement will prove invaluable to the CEV's "BEV2030" campaign. BEV2030, part of the wider "Volunteering Equality, Rights Action (VERA) project, is a blueprint that seeks to bring the vision of volunteering to policy-makers that demonstrates volunteers as "...more than just people-power for essential and meaningful tasks in society [...] they play an important role in social cohesion, interpersonal relationships, social transformation..." (CEV, 2021). One of the campaign's major thematic concepts involves "New volunteers and methods" (CEV, 2021) part of which includes the continued digitisation of volunteer efforts. The case study offered of the "Social Care Network" demonstrates that the advancement of digital technologies, including platforms and mobile applications such as "Social Care Network" are having a major impact on the digitisation of volunteering. This is clear through the increase in young people and newcomers that are taking on volunteering opportunities, giving people opportunities to engage in volunteer activities that may have previously lacked the means or resources to participate in an effective manner. This also resonates with other aspects of BEV2030, including its commitment to empowering volunteers through enablement and inclusion by enabling information about, and access to, volunteering. In addition, it seeks to include prospective volunteers through using modern technologies, such as the digital platforms discussed, to offer more accessible and resource conscious volunteer opportunities.

Challenges of Digital Technologies

Whilst digital technologies offer huge opportunities to the volunteer sector and the levels of civic engagement in volunteer initiatives, it is worth also considering the potential challenges that these can pose including technical limitations as well privacy and security issues. Regarding privacy and security issues posed by volunteer platforms and other digital technologies involving volunteering such as video calling software, the publication of personal information can pose risks with regards to safety. Park and Johnston (2017) use the example of volunteer platforms that were used as part of crisis management volunteering efforts in the wake of the Haiti earthquake. They posit that when personal data was released on such platforms in Haiti to help in rescue and aid efforts, it was accessible by anyone, as a result, the publicising of disaster-affected people's vulnerabilities endangered people, with some being targeted by nefarious groups with the purpose of robbery and human trafficking (Park and Johnston, 2017).

As a result, digital volunteer platforms need to consider an appropriate balance between protecting the privacy of its users and publicising important information about affected populations.

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This was brought further into the collective conscious of the European Union member states when the “General Data Protection Regulation” (GDPR) was introduced in 2018. The aim of GDPR, which was adapted from the 1995 Data Protection Directive (European Data Protection Supervisor, 2018) is to focus on the individual rights of a citizen, for example, now requiring explicit consent from an individual to use their information. Whilst this could seek to address the issue raised by Park and Johnston (2017), the issue is more nuanced, with many organisations who rely on individuals’ data as part of their operations finding ways to bypass such issues.

For example, in 2021, the Irish “Data Protection Commission” (DPC) ruled in favour of tech company Meta, who claimed that they do not need to ask for specific consent from their users when it comes to the use of their data as the users signed a “contract” that being Meta’s terms of service (ToS) when they signed up to the platform (Noyb, 2021). In the context of volunteering, despite the fact that GDPR should offer protections against scenarios such as the ones posited by Park and Johnston (2017), it is apparent that such protections can potentially be bypassed by forcing users to accept a ToS which omits these protections on first use of a volunteer platform and as a result does not solve potentially dangerous issues of privacy.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This report has sought to highlight the impact of digital technologies on volunteer engagement, assessing literature around the subject, in addition to offering a case study on a success story of the application of digital technologies and platforms on volunteer engagement. The report encourages the further use of digital technologies in volunteering, as the merit of their applications is huge, whether through their ability to recruit first-time volunteers, or to streamline the operations of the volunteering process. In addition, the report recommends the use of bespoke digital platforms and mobile applications as a best practice when it comes to the engagement of volunteers, this is as a result of their specifically designed nature and interface with volunteers and volunteer networks, this being despite the fact that they have a more limited reach than social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The report also advocates for a hybrid approach to digital technologies and volunteer engagement, ensuring that there are other non-digital systems which can complement the increasing use of the digital. This is in order not to alienate any prospective volunteers with who may lack the ability to interface with or access digital platforms.

In conclusion, the impact of digital technologies on volunteer engagement has been significant and transformative over the past decade. The proliferation of digital platforms, such as social media and mobile applications, has revolutionised the ways in which non-profits and volunteer organisations operate, recruit, motivate, and mobilise volunteers.

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Throughout this report, we have evaluated the benefits, challenges, and opportunities that arise from the integration of digital tools in the management of volunteers. The literature review highlighted the wide range of digital tools available for volunteer engagement, including social media platforms and volunteer-specific platforms and applications. While social media has a wider reach, it may not be as effective in promoting volunteer efforts due to the potential inundation of irrelevant information. On the other hand, volunteer platforms and applications offer a more centralised and efficient approach to volunteer engagement, facilitating better matching, recruiting, and management of volunteers. Despite some limitations, such as increased no-shows and dropouts, the advantages of these digital platforms outweigh the challenges they present.

The case study of the "Social Care Network" demonstrated the success of a digital platform in revolutionising volunteer engagement. The platform effectively matched volunteers with opportunities, resulting in a significant increase in volunteer engagement, particularly among young people. This aligns with the broader vision of the "Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030," one aspect of which emphasises the importance of digital technologies in empowering volunteers and creating more accessible and inclusive volunteer opportunities. Based on the evaluation conducted, this report recommends the further use of digital technologies in volunteering. It emphasises the effectiveness of bespoke digital platforms and mobile applications tailored to volunteer engagement, despite their limited reach compared to social media. The report as a result, advocates for a hybrid approach that combines digital technologies with non-digital systems to ensure inclusivity and accessibility for all prospective volunteers.

Therefore, the integration of digital technologies in volunteer engagement has revolutionised the sector, enabling better recruitment, management, and empowerment of volunteers. By leveraging digital tools effectively and addressing the associated challenges, non-profits and volunteer organisations can enhance their impact and create lasting change within communities.

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