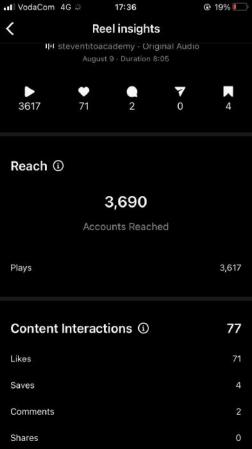# Instagram and social noise:
Where are the NGOs?

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Introduction

> *Tuesday, September 21, 2021. The assembly reels on the Steven Tito Academy Instagram account are almost always so successful in such a short time. Over 3000 accounts reached and plays. How come?*

Steven Tito Academy Instagram account. Reel on school assembly (left), Reel Insights (right).

"Web 2.0 technology" is a term used to distinguish contemporary social media (Wikis, blogs, embedded videos) from their immediate predecessors, static Web pages and message forums that characterized what was retroactively dubbed Web 1.0 (Coleman 2010, 489). As some scholars insist (Shirky 2008, Weinberger 2007; Coleman 2010, 489) social media allowed for more communicative interactivity, flexibility, social connectivity, user-generated content, and creativity, facilitating more democratic participation than did previous digital platforms and greater interaction among larger swaths of the global populace.

The promises of web 2.0 technologies represent a positive side of social media, but Barassi (2015, 65) argues against idealizing the rise of 'mass self-communication' as a positive for political participation. Instead, Barassi finds that the self-centred logic of social media presents a variety of challenges for political activists. Furthermore, she argues that in understanding of the individually centered networks of social media, we must consider the strong connection between online self-communication, individualism, and the capitalist discourse.

Considering that the relationship between social media and political activism is defined by activists' negotiation with the "self-centred" logics of web 2.0 technologies (Barassi, 2015), the aim of this article is to consider some of the reasons why small, grassroots NGOs struggle on social media, particularly Instagram, alongside the reasons why it can be beneficial to be present on the visual platform. I analyze concepts such as "networked individualism," "mass self-communication," "the problem of visibility" and the concept of "mobilization" from scholars like Barassi (2015) and Gerbaudo (2012). I apply these debates in anthropology and media studies to my own fieldwork, working in communications at The Baobab Home, a grassroots NGO in Bagamoyo, Tanzania, since June 2019.

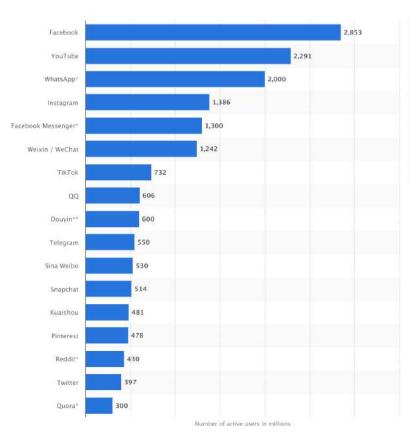## Social noise and social media activism

> *Monday, August 23, 2021. I published a reel on the Steven Tito Academy Instagram account, but I made the mistake of having too many hashtags in the caption so nothing got published interms of text and hashtags, the field remained empty. I did not realise that until the day after. Surprisingly, I noticed that it had 1800+ views and 8 new followers in less than 24 hours. Now,the question is...do we really need hashtags after all...?*

Networked individualism and mass self-communication

An understanding that the architecture of social media supports the development of individualized and egocentric forms of communication is present in the very early stages of social media research (Barassi 2015, 66). Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells was one of the first to argue that new interactive web platforms enable a form of communication and sociality that is "self-centred" around "networked individualism,"

where the individual becomes the central actor in politics (Barassi 2015, 66). American sociologist Barry Wellman called a "networked individualism" a situation in which the person rather than a specific place becomes the "portal" to political participation (Gerbaudo 2012, 34).

Castells described this media landscape as dominated by a paradigm of "self mass-communication" in which individuals and groups can broadcast their messages to large audiences. For Castells, the advent of mass self-communication carries the promise of autonomy from bureaucratic structures and increasing scope for political and social engagement from below (Gerbaudo 2012, 22). Castells' concept of "self mass-communication," or "mass communication of the self," is becomes particularly salient if we look at how individuals now have the power to spread their self-generated messages globally, potentially reaching billions of users worldwide by the medium of social media, and making societies intelligible to themselves through external representations (Mazzarella2004, 346). In fact, as of 2021, Facebook is the largest social media platform globally with a staggering 2.85 billion active users worldwide, followed by YouTube, with over 2 billion and Instagram with 1 billion active users. If we consider the fact that all these platforms are free and accessible to almost everyone, we can see the power of individual mass communication.

(Statista) Most popular social networks worldwide as of July 2021, ranked by number of active users (in millions).

Access to social media and freedom of expression are seen by many as a form of digital democracy. In fact, the understanding that individuals on social media have the power to rely on personal networks to create their own context and display their identity has often been seen as a radical and positive transformation, which democratizes media production and empowers individual agents to bring about social change from the grassroots level (Castells 2009, in Barassi 2015, 67).

I find myself in agreement with the idea that social media have the power to lead to many positive and empowering situations for social change and social movements on the individual level. However, Barassi suggests that a fundamental problem of the work of scholars of social media, like Castells, is that they focus on a discourse of empowerment without considering the relationship between digital capitalism and mass self-communication, and their downsides. Before continuing the analysis of individual agency over collective efforts, we turn to a case study in Bagamoyo, Tanzania.

Grassroots NGOs and Instagram activism: A case study in Bagamoyo

The Baobab Home is a registered 501(c)(3) organization in the USA and a registered foreign NGO in Bagamoyo, Tanzania. Founded in 2004, The Baobab Home is a small, grassroots NGO located on a twelve-acre farm on the Swahili coast just outside of Bagamoyo town. As of 2021, they run several programs in children's care, health care, and education, and they employ thirty-three Tanzanians. Everything started with an orphanage in 2004, when the founders dreamed of opening a home for children in Bagamoyo. The reality they encountered was that most children were not truly orphaned, but rather came from homes that could no longer support them due to issues related to HIV/AIDS, mental illness, and poverty. Experience through the years taught them that in order to effectively provide for vulnerable children, the focus had to be not only on the kids but on their extended families and the broader community. Thus, The Baobab Home expanded its focus towards a holistic approach, taking into account the various social, economic, and psychological aspects of disadvantaged situations in order to come up with sustainable solutions. Their programs have evolved over the years to meet the changing needs of the local community.

One of the main programs of the NGO is the primary school, Steven Tito Academy. It was founded in 2012 and currently teaches 180 students. As an English-medium primary school, Steven Tito Academy's mission is to serve children in the local community, offering high-quality education focused on individualized learning. Steven Tito Academy operates in a safe learning environment where teachers do not use corporal punishment on the students in any way as they believe in teaching students to take ownership and responsibility for their actions. As a charity school, Steven Tito Academy relies solely on donors to keep the school operating.

Both the NGO, The Baobab Home, and the primary school, Steven Tito Academy, have their own brand identity and therefore individual presence on Instagram. The accounts were created in early 2017 by the first communication professional in the organization. The main reasons why both organizations are present on Instagram is to support fundraising campaigns, raise awareness, reach new audiences, retain and engage

existing donors, recruit new volunteers and board members. The content strategy varies slightly on each account: The Baobab Home's message focuses more on advocating for children's rights and the environment, while Steven Tito Academy's on education. At the moment of writing, both accounts are still very small: The Baobab Home Instagram account has 676 followers, while Steven Tito Academy has 482.

Grassroots NGOs are often caught up with core functions of their operations, managing projects on the ground and raising funds to run such projects. However, the opportunity of free, widely-used communication platforms, where their voice can be heard without geographical barriers, is very appealing indeed. That's probably the reason why, at the early stage of the NGO, it was decided to open social media channels for both brands, creating potentially unmanageable work for the resources available. Today, both The Baobab Home and Steven Tito Academy are present on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn, making it a total of tenchannels to manage. On a daily basis, it quite impossible, unless that's the only task on hand. In my case, which I assume is quite common at most grassroots NGOs, I worked on a one-person team assigned to a variety of projects, one of them being social media.

The Baobab Home Instagram account.   Steven Tito Academy Instagram account.

Instagram allows activists to advocate for the causes they care about most, be it social justice, LGBTQ, indigenous rights, or climate change, to name a few. It's true, not much is needed to start an Instagram account, but a lot of energy, time, and work is required if you want to grow your account navigating through endless features and possibilities: hashtags, posts, stories, reels, live videos, online stores, emojis, and the list goes on. A simple emoji can sometimes elicit a response than a lengthy, framed question, like a well-framed photo can steal the show to captions.

The problem of 'visibility' and the concept of "mobilisation"

A lack of resources is not the only challenge for social media in the case of NGOs. Circling back to the 'networked individual' and the 'mass self-communication', I would like to focus on what Barassi (2015) identified as the problem of "visibility" of the individual over the collective. What emerged in Barassi's research (2015, 71) is that many activists believed that in an era of selfies and social media, individual messages are often given the same importance as messages that have arisen out of the tensions and negotiations of a collective of people, leading to "collective messages and voices" of oppositional groups being suffocated by the information overload and abundance of individual messages.

Suffocating is sometimes how it feels indeed. While Facebook clearly has more user profiles, Instagram is a strong visual storytelling platform with a unique and engaged audience. Nowadays, it seems like everyone is on Instagram from individuals, corporations, celebrities, to animals. The quantity of individual messages online creates a form of *social noise* which distracts people from more serious, collective concerns (Barassi 2015, 72). The social noise created on Instagram is suffocating meaningful messages from collective effortslike for instance small, grassroots NGOs. Speaking from experience, sometimes so much effort and passion go into writing and producing quality content, to then not being heard, or better seen, on Instagram.

Furthermore, the problem of visibility of the individual over the collective identifies two additionally issues as argued by Barassi (2015). First, individual participation on social media could not really be perceived as politically important or meaningful for collective action. The only time such participation was perceived as meaningful was when it is aimed at producing and sharing content about the group's political beliefs, activities, or events (Barassi 2015, 71). I have experienced firsthand how the abundance of individual messages can obscure the NGO's message: many times, supporters of the NGO, being board members, volunteers, or donors prefer creating content themselves and publish it referencing the NGO (and sometimes not even that). I usually insist on the importance of sharing the content generated by the NGO itself, as that amplifies the message and strengthen its authenticity, while I would discourage posting personal photos as there's the risk of showing insensitive images (with minors, for instance) or using different campaign wording. Secondly, the problem of 'unmediated interactivity' as individual messages have the potential to challenge, deconstruct, and weaken the message of the campaign (Barassi 2015, 77). Referring to her interview with Franz, I can think of cases when individuals in the NGO network posted visual and written content not in line with the NGO positioning (e.g.: white savior style photos).
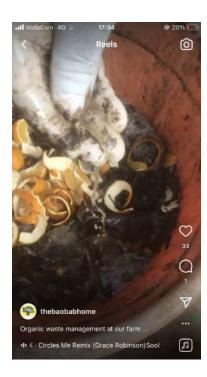
However, grassroots NGOs do need individuals, and they do need their messages amplified by "networked individuals." There's a positive side we should also consider, and the power that these networked individuals have. Here I would like to link to the concept of "mobilisation" defined by Gerbaudo as "a process of gathering or assembling of individuals and groups around something they share in common" (Gerbaudo 2012, 20). Gerbaudo also offers a provisional definition of the process of mobilisation as "a performative act of gathering or assembling which spatially re-composes together in a
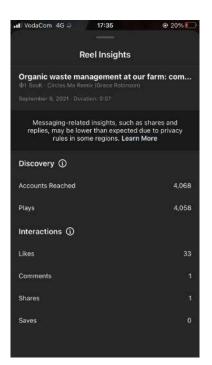
temporary unity what was previously torn apart, and which in so doing creates public space as a form of collective and emplaced experience" (Gerbaudo 2012, 39).

Social media individuals to assemble by uniting people in one digital place by common interests and beliefs across different geographical locations. Social media promises us connection and the possibility to relate with those similar to us, regardless of where they are located. Gerbaudo refers to the "choreography of assembly" as the assembling of social groupings in fragmented and dispersed societies, arguing that it requires a scene-setting for the assembling to happen, as well as the construction of common collective identifications among participants (Gerbaudo 2012, 40).

In the context of grassroots NGOs, the scene-setting is played by the NGO and the construction of common collective identifications among participants can happen by using a visual storytelling platform such as Instagram since it involves an "emotional investment." Instagram allows NGOs to post visual content and show the human side of their work. This creates an emotional link with their supporters, who feel a more personal connection to their projects: they see what happens on the ground, they feel they are on-site with them. It also allows to get the NGO's message beyond the existing audience: if hashtags and other features are used strategically, they can extend the network beyond the current followers. On Instagram, NGOs may also find like-minded organizations or even potential partners for the future.

Conclusion

The Baobab Home Instagram: Reel on organic waste management (left), Reel Insights (right).

> *Friday, September 24, 2021. OK, I didn't see this coming. The reel about the organic waste fertilizer with a hand pulling up liquid from a waste bin from September 9 got over 4000 accounts reached and plays. One person even sent a private message asking if we were selling it.*

The concepts of 'networked individualism' and 'mass self-communication' set the initial theoretical background for the analysis of a grassroots NGO in Tanzania, and its struggles with social media, especially Instagram. Building on theoretical background how around "networked individualism" and "mass self-communication" create social noise and distract from meaningful messages, I moved forward with the problem of 'visibility' of the individual over the collective. The visibility of the individual can lead to "unmediated interactivity," which risks weakening the collective with the wrong juxtaposition of public messages. All this can make us question if web 2.0 technologies, and in our case Instagram, can really be a channel for the NGO to be heard.

Finally, I considered the power of networked individuals, and the theoretical concept of "mobilization," alongside the emotional investment linked to the nature of Instagram. I find that there are positive reasons and hopes for grassroots NGOs to keep working on their Instagram activism strategy and continue advocating for their causes.

This brief analysis could certainly be expanded with more in-depth research of different areas on the social media struggles of grassroots NGOs, for instance, analyzing the constant fight against the algorithm and how that relates to digital capitalism.

Methods

> *Wednesday, August 11, 2021. Working on-site today, every now and then the laptop hot spot disconnects from the phone internet, can't get anything done, so frustrating.*

Postill and Pink's (2012) descriptions of the "internet ethnographer," and the implications of the rapidly growing social media platforms are very relevant to my analysis. Social media platforms do create new sites for ethnographic fieldwork. In fact, the analysis presented in this article is based on almost two and half years of work in the field of NGO social media communication. I used my work experience as the research field together with online ethnographic methods that traverse online/offline contexts and are collaborative, participatory, open and public (Postill and Pink 2012, 124).

Postill and Pink (2012) define social media as part of a "messy web." Yet, social media ethnography engages with forms of digital practice, compilation, sharing and openness that involve specific departures from conventional ethnographic practice (Postill and Pink 2012, 125). I found my work experience at the NGO to be similar to Postill's social media ethnography practice in Barcelona in 2010-11. I have also been catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting and archiving on Instagram for the purpose of this article, as well as formy daily work. Some methods could be summarized as *online participation* and *online observation*, as I engaged with the content produced by the NGO, and its online network by collaborating on a range of activities like

commenting, liking, or sharing, as well as observing how others behaved on Instagram, and analyzing how the NGO's audience behaved and engaged with NGO's generated content by using Instagram analytics. I also used *online research* to investigate certain topics on web 2.0 technologies, from websites to blogs and online media outlets. Lastly, I kept a *digital field diary* to record ideas, mistakes, confusions, problems, frustrations while working at the NGO. It is dated and takes into account my personal biases and feelings to understand their influences on the research.

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