

# Social Media Role in Communication Exchange of International Volunteer Experience

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**Abstract.** *Information communication technology extends traditional ways of volunteer engagement. Reaching out to people and giving them opportunity to be part of change or to make a difference in their country or abroad uses new communication channels. This new communication tools have potential to help volunteer organizers to build stronger relationship with existing volunteers and to recruit new volunteers. With the use of social media tools volunteers can see comments, blogs, post, pictures, and videos of other volunteers' experience and get more courage and inspiration to involve in such activities. Trough this research authors wanted to promote volunteering and the use of social media in such purposes. Further, authors wanted to research what are the attitudes about the use of social media of existing volunteer, which role does social media have in communication exchange of international volunteering experience and what are their attitudes about volunteering in general.*

**Keywords.** volunteering, social media, international communication, volunteering experiences

## 1 Introduction

Information communication technology extends traditional ways of volunteer engagement. Reaching out to people and giving them opportunity to be part of change or to make a difference in their country or abroad uses new communication channels.

This new communication tools can help organizers to build stronger relationship with existing volunteers and to recruit new volunteers. With the use of social media tools volunteers can see comments, blogs, post, pictures, and videos of other volunteers' experience and get more courage and inspiration to involve in such activities.

There are numerous Facebook pages related to different volunteering initiatives across the globe. Some of them count more than 90 000 likes [15]. Since it beginning, and now even more actively than ever before, Internet is one of the prime mediums of communication. Many young volunteers growing up in internet age, and first thing they do about something is *google* it.

World Wide Web enabled different technologies to support communication, collaboration and interaction between different entities. Such Internet enhanced interactions for communication are termed as social media [9]. The prime goal of this study is to research the potential role of social media in promoting volunteering and awareness of how volunteerism is needed.

## 2 Values of Volunteering

Volunteering has long legacy. The root of word volunteering comes from the description of someone who "offers himself for a military service" c.1600 [4]. Later, the word was also used in a non-military context.

In early 19<sup>th</sup> century there were already some organizations which aim was to help people in need. Much more organization with the same aim appeared beginning the first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Rotary Club, Kiwanis, Lions Club and the predecessor to the United Way) [3]. Great Depression and World Wars were prime triggering motivations for many people to help the ones in need.

The passion of volunteers to help others after World War II shifted focus to other areas including helping the poor and volunteering overseas (Peace Corps, United Nations and the Council of Europe) [3]. These organizations coordinate short and long term voluntary projects around the world. They provide information on international volunteering opportunities and establish organisations networks of engaging volunteers.

One of the main actors playing a vital role in the promotion of volunteering at international level is the United Nations Volunteers programme (UNV). UNV started the tradition of celebrating International Volunteer Day on December 5, and now is celebrated every year by more than 100 countries worldwide [7].

Another initiative was that 2001 was declared as International Year of the Volunteers. 10 years later 2011, has been designated to be European Year of the Volunteer. Main objectives were to promote the values and benefits of volunteering as well to encourage more people to volunteer and to make a positive difference.

Verb volunteering is generally used for explaining an altruistic activity, intended to promote good, to improve human quality of life.

The European Youth Forum believes that an activity can only be defined as volunteering when it meets the following criteria [5]:

- an activity undertaken of a person's own free will and involves the commitment of time and energy to actions of benefit to others and to society as a whole;
- the activity is unpaid but can include reimbursement of expenses directly related to the voluntary activity;
- it is for a non-profit cause and is primarily undertaken within a nongovernmental organisation and therefore cannot be motivated by material or financial gain;
- volunteering should not be used to substitute or replace paid employment.

National governments across the globe are beginning to pay more attention to volunteering and seek to support and encourage it. Volunteering is recognized and promoted as an activity of interest to the Republic of Croatia as well. In the Law on Volunteering they say that volunteering leads to better quality of life, more active participation of people in social life and helps the development of human and a more equal society [8].

Volunteering definition that is adopted by the Republic of Croatia [8], states that volunteering is voluntary personal investment of time, effort, knowledge and skills to perform services or activities for the benefit of another person or for the general welfare, and are carried out by people in the manner provided in this Law, without conditions for the payment of monetary compensation or other property used for volunteering done, unless this Law provides otherwise.

European Social Survey (ESS) in period of 2006/2007 reported that 36% of Europeans had taken part in work for voluntary/charitable organisations at least once during the past year, which further implies that around 150 million adults (aged 15 years and over) volunteer in Europe at least once a year [5].

Usually key groups that organize and support volunteering activities are: religious organizations (i.e. church), civil society organizations and institutions of health and social care. A prime motivation of volunteering is act of goodwill or some personal interest in the cause (personal growth, feeling of self-worth and respect, skills development, socialization and fun).

### 3 International Volunteering and Youth

Researchers found volunteers volunteer abroad for both altruistic (e.g., desire to help, give back, make a difference) and self-interested reasons (e.g., authentic travel, gain experience, engage in travel and

adventure, learn, pleasure-seeking, personal growth, cultural exchange, professional development).

Utilitarian motives for students usually are to enhance human capital, such as work experience and job training, develop new sets of skills, explore different careers paths, enhance their resumes, or make contacts that help them find paid work[8]. Studies in the US found that students who volunteer were more likely than non-volunteers to have leadership ability, social self-confidence, critical thinking skills, and conflict resolution skills [1].

Further, Katz & Rosenberg [10] report in their research that volunteering experience serves as a differentiation attribute of employees which signals the (potential) employer that he or she has qualities that make him or her more desirable than other candidates.

Authors Zrinščak and Lakoš [18] conducted the research in Croatia as a part of international study on student volunteering across 14 countries. Their results showed that Croatian students volunteer mostly irregular and informal. Most of them volunteer for the neighborhood/local activist group, in homes for the elderly, shelters and similar organizations and usually for intrinsic reasons (inner satisfaction, making social contacts, learning new things etc.). Students in general find this kind of activities useful.

Volunteering is today recognized as an important tool for gaining experience, knowledge, skills and core competences for lifelong learning. Work experience and diverse competencies acquired volunteering increase employability, enhance mobility, and increasing the civic responsibility of individuals.

## 4 Social media and volunteering

In this paper, we are trying to see what potentials social media has on volunteer communication. Communication is the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing or using some other medium [12].

We can say that social media are changing the way that information is passed across societies and around the world [11]. The social networking sites have audio and visual capabilities, such as web-blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, media sharing spaces, RSS Feeds, micro-blogging sites, Facebook, LinkedIn and they have capabilities to promote synchronous or asynchronous interactions and communication [9].

Every social media platform is different, but important thing is that people usually use more of them at once. Different platforms allow different ways of interaction and each of them have strengths and weaknesses. Platforms such as such as Facebook, Twitter and Google+, have become common communication and interaction mediums in society [17]. Platforms such as Skype and MSN allow for free, fast worldwide communication. Social media

can be seen as a valuable tool for time and cost saving.

When we are talking about social media, the main thing is followers. Usually, organizations and people are trying to have many followers, and that looks great. But, what if you have a lot of followers, but just few of them are active? That's why it is important to go beyond the numbers. It is not enough for organization to have a lot of followers, it is important that organization have a lot of active followers [16].

Volunteers will have similar concerns and questions about the volunteer experience and responding to the same questions repeatedly can become tedious and time consuming [15]. Volunteering organizations have always relied on volunteers to deliver their messages and their work. In the corporate world, many organizations have long been using social media for recruitment [13]. That is something that volunteering organizations needs to learn and try to improve their work with using social media. Today there are also different courses, made for helping organizations to learn how to use social media and how to get the best of it [14].

An organizational Facebook page, for example, can be used as a public space in which volunteer questions can be answered by the organization and viewed by others [14]. Authors had experience with using Facebook for volunteering and we can confirm that social media helps us to make communication easier with other volunteers.

Volunteering in Croatia in the last few years becoming very popular and people are more curious and they want to be included in some volunteering (we are not discussing their reasons). There are many volunteering groups and organizations, and with developing of social media, information is sharing much faster.

If we take a look in users of social media in Croatia, we can see that number of residents that are using Facebook is 1,6 million (Croatia has about 4,6 million residents, what means that approximately 36% of population is using Facebook) [2]. Except Facebook, there are Twitter, YouTube, Google+, LinkedIn etc. People get used to the social media and they expect to get information via social networks. That is the main reason for volunteering organizations to use social media. They have to exploit the potential of social media for volunteering.

Using Social Media today is normal part of our everyday life, but using social media for communication on the volunteering project was something new. One of the authors was coordinator of volunteering activities on the international volunteering project. For the easier communication with younger volunteers, they decided to use social media tool Facebook. At the beginning of the project, main communication channel was electronic mail and all important information have been delivered to the

volunteers via e-mail. The project didn't have homogeneous group of volunteers. There were a lot of young volunteers. For them it wasn't interesting to share information through e-mails because usually they get all information via social media tools, e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Google+.

So the project coordinators decided to try sharing information through Facebook. And what happened? Younger volunteers had much better reactions, but also the other volunteers and project staff really quickly get used to Facebook communication and after that all information were shared through created Facebook group. Coordinators mail, it was parallel communication. Result of that was, in one way, better and more personal communication with volunteers, they started to answer more quickly on the last minute changes in the schedule and they started to share useful information between them. But there are always two sides of the story. Facebook gave us a new approach to the communication, but also gave us some problems. If you use social didn't shut down communication via e- media (in this case, Facebook) for business, there is no border between business and personal, because immediately people that you work with can see your personal information.

There is a big perspective of using social media in the communication process, but users should know what information they want to share and it's important to define communication rules.

Inspired by this good experience authors wanted further the research potential have social media in information sharing about volunteering and making international volunteering more popular.

## 5 Research

As authors mentioned before, the goals of this research are to see what potential social media have in sharing information about volunteering and making volunteering more popular and which role social media have in international volunteering experience exchange.

Authors made a survey (English and Croatian version) to see what domestic and international volunteers think about using social media in communication for volunteering activities.

## 6 Results and discussion

The research was performed in 2013 from February till April. Survey completed 46 people (23 from Croatia and 23 from other countries; age between 19 and 30). Demographic data show us that more women participated in our research and most of participants have University degree (Figure 1).

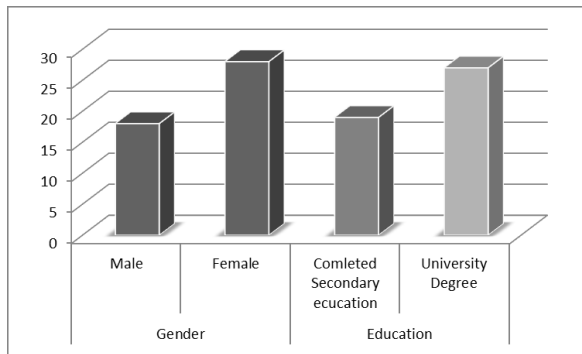


Figure 1. Demographic data

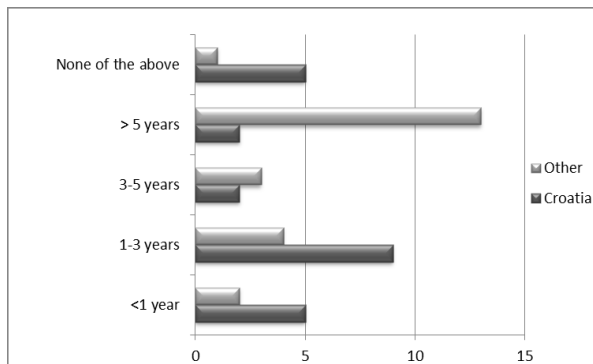


Figure 2. Volunteering experience in Croatia and other countries

For the beginning, we wanted to see how many of our participants have volunteering experience (Figure 2). On the picture, you can see that Croatian volunteers have less experience than our other participants and also, there are more participants in Croatia who didn't have volunteering experience at all.

From collected data we can conclude that volunteering is becoming popular in Croatia, but it's not still popular like in other countries.

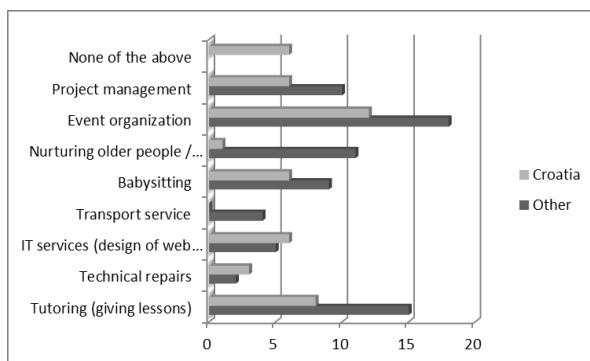


Figure 3. Types of volunteering activities

There are many possibilities for volunteering. In Figure 3 are showed activities in which our participants volunteered.

The most popular volunteering activities in Croatia are: event organization, tutoring, IT services, babysitting...

In the other countries, the most popular volunteering activities are event organization and tutoring. Also, very popular activities are: nurturing soldier people, babysitting, project management, IT services and etc.

In the next table (Table 1), you can see a short summary of responses of our participants.

Most of Croatian volunteers usually volunteer in the local community and in their region. It is similar with other participants too, they usually volunteer in local community and in the region, but also they are volunteering on national and international level.

We asked participants what are their reasons for volunteering. Croatian volunteers are volunteering from three main reasons: they feel better because of volunteering, they want to leave a positive impact on the society and they consider volunteering as their hobby.

Other participants are usually volunteering because they want to leave a positive impact on the society, they feel better and they consider volunteering as their duty.

One part of our research was to discover how well are people informed about volunteering activities. From the results we can see that both sides, Croatian and other participants, are not so good informed about volunteering activities around them. So, we asked which ways of communication they usually use for contact with volunteering organizers and what they think about using social media in promotion of volunteering.

Most Croatian participants said that they get information about volunteering from different social networks and from personal communication.

Participants from other countries usually use e-mail and social networks for communication with volunteering organizers.

Most of our participants consider social networks as important tool for getting information.

Table 1. Volunteering and social media

Qo.	Question	Answers	Croatia (%)	Other (%)
1.	Range of your volunteering? (More answers possible)	In the local community	73,91%	91,30%
		In the region	17,39%	52,17%
		On the national level	8,70%	26,09%
		On the international level	4,35%	21,74%
		None of the above	21,74%	8,70%
2.	What are your reasons for volunteering? (More answers possible)	I feel better	60,87%	82,61%
		I want to leave a positive impact on society	43,48%	100,00%
		I consider volunteering as my duty	4,35%	34,78%
		It is my hobby	52,17%	26,09%
		Other	17,39%	13,04%
3.	How well are you informed about volunteering activities in your school/faculty/workplace?	On the Likert scale (1-5): 1. I am not informed at all	13,04%	13,04%
		2.	8,70%	4,35%
		3.	26,09%	17,39%
		4.	26,09%	39,13%
		5. I am well informed	26,09%	26,09%
4.	How well are you informed about volunteering activities in your town?	On the Likert scale (1-5): 1. I am not informed at all	13,04%	13,04%
		2.	17,39%	13,04%
		3.	30,43%	34,78%
		4.	30,43%	39,13%
		5. I am well informed	8,70%	0,00%
5.	How well are you informed about volunteering activities outside of your town?	On the Likert scale (1-5): 1. I am not informed at all	21,74%	21,74%
		2.	34,78%	43,48%
		3.	30,43%	26,09%
		4.	13,04%	8,70%
		5. I am well informed	0,00%	0,00%
6.	How well are you informed about volunteering activities outside of your country?	On the Likert scale (1-5): 1. I am not informed at all	30,43%	39,13%
		2.	47,83%	21,74%
		3.	21,74%	17,39%
		4.	0,00%	17,39%
		5. I am well informed	0,00%	4,35%

7.	What was your most common way of communication with the volunteering organizers? (One answer possible)	Personal (face to face)	17,39%	34,78%
		Telephone/Mobile phone	8,70%	0,00%
		E-mail	13,04%	43,48%
		Social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Skype...)	43,48%	17,39%
		None of the above	17,39%	4,35%
8.	Is it important for you to be informed via social networks?	On the Likert scale (1-5): 1. It is not important at all	8,70%	0,00%
		2.	0,00%	17,39%
		3.	26,09%	26,09%
		4.	52,17%	26,09%
		5. It is very important	13,04%	30,43%
9.	Do you trust information on social networks?	On the Likert scale (1-5): 1. I don't believe at all	0,00%	0,00%
		2.	26,09%	34,78%
		3.	34,78%	43,48%
		4.	39,13%	21,74%
		5. It fully believe	0,00%	0,00%
10.	If information about volunteering activities would be on social networks, would you like to receive notifications about volunteering activities/events?	On the Likert scale (1-5): 1. I don't agree at all	4,35%	0,00%
		2.	8,70%	13,04%
		3.	8,70%	8,70%
		4.	56,52%	26,09%
		5. I fully agree	21,74%	52,17%

We tried to discover is there any possibility for using social media in better promotion of volunteering activities and how people perceive social networks. From results showed in Table 1, we can make a conclusion that most of our participants believe in information on social networks and they consider that social media can be good advertising tool for volunteering.

One of the most important questions in our research was: *Do you think that more people will include in volunteering activities, if information about them would be on social networks?* You can see the results on the next picture (Figure 4).

Most of Croatian participants think that social networks can bring something good in volunteering and can make it more popular.

It is similar with our participants from other countries, they fully agree that more people will be included in volunteering if more information would be on social networks.

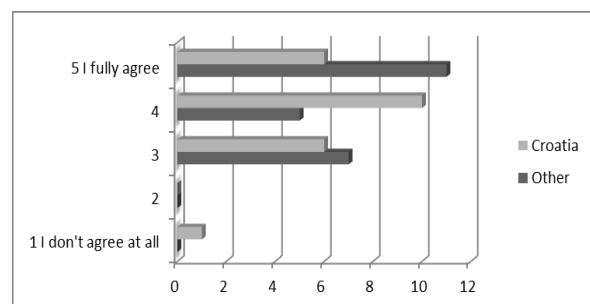


Figure 4. Information about volunteering on social networks

Having all the results in mind, the following conclusion can be made that using social media for promotion in volunteering can be just a benefit and that volunteering organizations should use social media more.

## 7 Conclusion

This research showed that Croatian students as well as students from other countries use social media very often and they are used to get all information about interesting activities through this communication medium. Further, this research revealed that more people will volunteer if there will be an opportunity to find information about volunteering activities through social media tools like Facebook.

Based on literature review and our research hors conclude that volunteering is an important activity that brings benefits to societies as well to volunteers. And that new communication tools like social media can have great potential in communication exchange of international volunteering experience.

For the end authors want to share some of international volunteer opinions about volunteering:

Ece, 22, Turkey:

*“I think everybody can make a difference. Just by sharing different perspectives, and learning to respect others' opinions would make the world a nicer place to live. If I don't do anything about this, it would be nothing but selfishness to expect others to do it.”*

Juan, 23, Brazil:

*“Change the way technology and resources are used in order to oversee the caring for basic human needs. If me as an individual set an example, then others would be encouraged to have an impact on society.”*

Naty, 22, USA:

*“... through my research in the 17th century text Don Quixote I know I can inspire others to achieve their dreams. One of the most valuable privileges of being human is doing things without expecting anything in return.”*

Darko, 20, Croatia:

*“... Volunteering has changed me as a person because I have become more socially sensitive, look at things differently, expand many horizons, and thus leads me to a broader sense of volunteerism among young people and help those who need help.”*

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