If not for profit,
for what and how?

S O C I A L
E N T E R P R I S E

External communication practices and organizational legitimacy: a perspective from the Portuguese Third Sector

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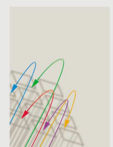Sociology Institute, Porto University

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INTRODUCTION

Third Sector Organizations (TSO) face a set of challenges in contemporary western societies, namely a demand for accrued efficacy and quality in their activities, an enhanced efficiency in procedures and creativity in attracting and managing financial resource, or the adoption of an active role within the socio-political context. Such challenges require the management activities of TSOs to obey criteria of thoroughness and quality that simultaneously concur with the principles and values of ethic business.

Such demands involve the creation and preservation of a legitimate functioning standard. Therefore, we think the trend in strategic and managerial responses will be to design communication strategies that, by conveying the transparency and clarity of the TSOs' *modus operandi* to various stakeholders, ensure the resources and benefits typically linked to positive institutional reputation. In the context of the so-called *Network Society* (Castells, Majer, & Gerhardt, 2000), each organization's diverse modalities of external communication tend to work as a means of legitimizing the organization with a growing notoriety. Against this backcloth, the analysis of organizational legitimacy has been based on a model that rests on three dimensions: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive. (Suchman, 1995).

Organizational legitimacy is a multidimensional concept referring to the perception of a certain entity as desirable or appropriate within a particular set of cultural norms, values, beliefs and definitions (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Suchman, 1995). Thus, legitimating strategies concern the dimensions of the organizational setting that are affected, according to some institutional theories (Suchman, 1995), by the cultural or symbolic imperatives of the context within which they operate.

This study is based on empirical data from 89 Portuguese TSOs. The data were collected both through a survey focusing on external communication practices and website analysis. It is assumed that the external communication of the TSOs follows a strategy of organizational legitimacy that is influenced by macro-societal conditions, which mould organizational culture as well as management practices. It is also assumed that within the Third Sector's current setting, TSOs will tend to prioritise organizational strategies that allow them to gain, preserve, or increase legitimacy levels ascribed by communities and stakeholders. A research that links the main stimuli of organizational legitimacy to communication options is offered. Its main purpose is to characterize the external communication practices of Portuguese TSOs by applying a model of organizational legitimacy to the analysis of their websites.

1. SOCIETAL CHALLENGES AND OPORTUNITIES FOR THIRD SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

According to the sociological perspective of organizational legitimacy, and following the work of Nicholls & Cho (2006) and Dart (2004), it is important to determine the main macro-structural conditions currently faced by TSOs. In our view, these are of two different types: (1) societal stimuli and (2) opportunities for action. By societal stimuli we mean the demands, or pressures faced by the Third Sector as a whole in modern societies.

Like the Public and Private sectors, the Third Sector faces social expectations, political influences, and economic pressures from numerous sources more or less interested in its activities. Currently, TSOs seem to be forced to deal with a gradual increase in demands from

modern societies and their actors, led by governments, funding entities and the so-called Civil Society (Nicholls, 2009).

It is assumed that the main societal stimuli TSOs are faced with are generically encompassed by the following triad: (1) resource attraction and management; (2) quality and efficacy of interventions; (3) institutional and political representation of the Civil Society.

The first societal pressure that the Third Sector faces relates to the pragmatic task of attracting and managing resources effectively, especially financial ones, which are necessary to pursue a social mission. For example, in the US context, especially since the 1990s, this kind of pressure has been acknowledged by a series of academic studies that highlight several sustainability fragilities of the non-lucrative sector, namely its excessive dependency on private subsidies and donations (Powell & Steinberg, 2006; Lester M Salamon & Anheier, 1997).

In Portugal, the financial sustainability of Third Sector organizations has been questioned for similar reasons, despite the distinct characteristics of national TSOs. Working in a sector seen as a strategic partner of the Welfare-State in providing social services, most TSOs are largely dependent on state funding and they have not been able to draw economic surpluses from their activity (Carvalho, 2010). As Andrade & Franco (2007) refer, excessive dependency on public funding raises several constraints to the organizations' activities. Such constraints tend to grow in face of the financial shortcomings of the Portuguese state, intense competition for public funding, or the increased bureaucratic requirements of partnership contracts, among others.

Another type of pressure that TSOs have undergone directly concerns the quality and efficacy of their social interventions. In other words, when moving from a paradigm of mere charity to one of professionalization, these organizations are expected to effectively and efficaciously intervene in the social and environmental areas and to contribute decisively to solve the problems of the communities, yet according to high ethical standards (Henriques & Neto, 2001; Mair & Marti, 2006; A. Nicholls, 2006).

On one side, this concerns the beneficiaries' overall experience, or the quality they ascribe to the services that are provided. It is on their behalf that quality systems are implemented, with certifications such as ISO 9001[1] or EQUASS[2]. However, such systems are heavily dependent on quantifiable objectives, goals or indicators. This means that the focus is invariably put on operational management, which then turns to factual objectives and is held responsible for attaining certain results. On the other side, it concerns innovation as a prerequisite of quality, which is not incompatible with quality certification systems. Nevertheless, according to this second approach, TSOs guided by the primary purpose of systemic and long-reach social change should look for new and better ways to answer social problems or requirements (Alvord, Brown, & Letts, 2004; Peredo & Mclean, 2006). Here, innovative and transformative features are invoked as the solution for prevailing social problems that have not been effectively answered either by more charitable/assistance approaches or by interventions ruled by an isomorphic constraining field, both public and private.

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[1] The ISO 9001 norm is an international reference that acknowledges the organization's efforts to ensure conformity of its products and/or services, client satisfaction, and continuous improvement according to standard norms. (Online: http://www.apcer.pt/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=96%253Aiso-9001&catid=3&Itemid=10; Access: November 11, 2012).

[2] EQUASS is a "system of quality recognition, assurance, and certification addressed to organizations that provide social services for publics with special necessities" (*EQUASS – European Quality Assurance for Social* Services (n.d.). Access: January 7, 2013, at the POPH Website: http://www.poph.qren.pt/upload/docs/eixos/6_4_EQUASS.pdf

The last demand highlighted here concerns the institutional and political representation of the civil society. The concept of Global Civil Society[3], though still unclear and lacking empirical verification, is interesting as an answer to demands for new social, economic and political models and "contracts" (Keane, 2003; L. M. Salamon, Sokolowski, & Anheier, 1999). According to this perspective, the Third Sector and its organizations assemble the necessary conditions to become the institutional leaders and representatives of communities, citizenship concerns, solidarity causes and mutual support practices; and to represent neglected interests and legitimate aspirations to systemic change (Evers, 2000; L. M. Salamon et al., 1999).

Despite the aforementioned societal pressures, some macro-structural conditions are also likely to empower citizens and institutions. One of these pertains to the fact that, since the end of the XXth century, societies have moved towards a new technological paradigm. Information and communication technologies (I.C.T.) are at its core and this has utterly transformed the way we perceive the world even though this did not lead to a "new" society (Castells et al., 2000). The emergence of the current technological paradigm rests on a development mode that came into being with the digital revolution of the 1970s and 1980s, aligned with the evolution and globalization of the capitalist mode of production typical of advanced societies (Castells et al., 2000; Freeman, 1997). Doubtlessly, the development of the Internet is one of its paramount exponents, registering more than 2 billion users by the end of 2011[4].

We thus argue that the setting described here may represent a strategic and operational challenge, within which new technologies require new sets of skills, cultural standards and organizational policies. However, it also offers an opportunity for TSOS to develop specific communication actions in order to reap tangible and intangible benefits. In other words, TSOs may try to understand what are the expectations and concerns of stakeholders by using the interactive functionalities of the communicational tools available on the Internet. Taking the maximum advantage of these tools may lead to accrued effectiveness in receiving and providing information, therefore enhancing the probability of meeting the parties' expectations.

In fact, TSOs may develop a communication strategy twice as beneficial: (1) By choosing an enlarged governance modality resting on a transparent accountability that submits to public scrutiny all kinds of organizational information considered relevant both internally and externally; and (2) by furthering the satisfaction of human needs, namely those of social gathering based on shared feelings and concerns, by providing a space that stimulates the creation, support and/or growth of a "virtual community".

In short, considering available opportunities in terms of external communication, TSOs can combine a legitimating strategy that is able to attract resources, enhance their reputation and improve the quality of internal decisions.

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[3] According to Keane (2003, p. 8), the Global Civil Society refers to a "non-governmental system of interconnected socio-economic institutions that straddle the whole earth (…). It is an unfinished project that consists of sometimes thick, sometimes thinly stretched networks, pyramids and hub-and-spoke clusters of socio-economic institutions and actors who organize themselves across borders, with the deliberate aim of drawing the world together in new ways".

[4] Source: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm. Access: May 3, 2012.

2. STRATEGIES OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMATION THROUGH EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

As Power (2007, *cit in* Nicholls, 2009) contends, every organization exists in a "reputation constellation" within which organizational boundaries, environments and societies are negotiated according to conceptual, legal, or ethical dynamics. In other words, faced with external stimuli, organizations will tend to incorporate them in their strategy in order to correspond to social expectations and consequently reach adequate reputation or legitimacy levels in order to preserve or increase their resources and benefits (Dart, 2004). In fact, organizational legitimacy emerges from complex social processes involving stakeholders as well as other actors who define and confer legitimacy. So, the social construction of organizational legitimacy is both an active and passive process that takes place between organizational actors and the actors of the community and society at large (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Suchman, 1995).

The Sociology of Organizations owes the concept of "legitimacy" to the pioneering contributes of Max Weber and Talcott Parsons (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). The weberian notion according to which (1) the social practice of an organization is guided by social, impersonal and objective rules, laws or norms; and (2) conformity grants legitimacy to an organization that acts coherently with its designs and goals (according to a certain type of rationality) is particularly influential in current organizational theories.

So, organizational legitimacy is a stipulation that displays normative and cultural alignment, congruency between the values that shape organizational activities and the rules, expectations and dispositions of a relevant normative system (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Suchman, 1995).

Based on the works of Dart (2004), A. Nicholls & H. Cho (2006) and Suchman (1995), we emphasize the importance of three types of legitimacy TSOs may aspire to by resorting to external communication practices: (1) pragmatic legitimacy; (2) moral legitimacy; and (3) cognitive legitimacy.

Each TSO displays a certain balance between organizational priorities, ascribing a different significance and importance to the various factors of organizational legitimacy. There are no pre-established formulae. However, it has been noticed that, in most cases, because moral legitimacy deals with normative values and dimensions, it is particularly relevant (Goodin, 2003; A. Nicholls, 2006) in view of the sector's vocation. This is one of the matters we intend to analyse.

Notwithstanding, pragmatic legitimacy involves dynamics concerning influence and strategic calculation and is therefore especially addressed to funding entities and the revenues on their investment (Suchman, 1995). So, it is based on material relations regarding resources, power, and dependency between entities.

In the context of the European Third Sector, it tends to be accepted that TSOs must pursue a strategy of economic sustainability that allows them to effectively fulfil their social mission (Defourny, 2009). However, whatever the adopted strategies are, the need of congruency between sustainability practices and the values embodied in their mission seems to be indisputable. To achieve this, TSOs can count on funding options that include national and international governmental, as well as private and philanthropic sources. Other options may include the development of business activities provided that the economic benefits drawn from

the latter are duly channelled to their mission. In this context, organizations are urged to diversify their revenue sources, framed by their particular model (Alter, 2006).

The focus of pragmatic legitimacy strategies lays on:

1. Understanding the implicit and explicit expectations of stakeholders by resorting to interactive tools that range from e-mail to discussion forums, petitions and suggestion boxes (Waters, 2007), not forgetting the new functionalities offered by social networks or the WEB 2.0[5];
2. Preserving and/or expanding institutional networks and partnerships by creating interaction, control, participation, and cooperation mechanisms addressed to fellow organizations/peers, political organizations, or the market.
3. Creating opportunities to obtain material resources through a congruent, proactive, and technically functional strategy (e.g., publicising campaigns and events; profitable activities; online donations).

The second type of organizational legitimacy is moral legitimacy. Of a more normative nature, it concerns the evaluation of the adequacy between practices and mission as well as the social desirability of the organization's activities (Suchman, 1995; Dart, 2004). It occurs when organizational actions are seen as morally acceptable in light of a particular social set of values (Suchman, 1995).

According to Young (2006), social value is the result of a set of activities, products or services that benefit and are valued by people whose needs have not been met through other means, namely the state or the market. For TSOs, creating social value is an end in itself and it guides the whole strategy of creation, preservation, and scale of social impact (Zietlow, 2001; Nicholls & Cho, 2006).

Goodin (2003) explains that such premise underlies the general perception of TSOs as more "reliable" than profit-making organizations: maybe they are not more efficient, but they support a morally "appropriate" cause, project a certain set of "correct" values and pursue the 'right' purposes, that is, socially valued purposes.

Notwithstanding, TSOs' activities may reach beyond the improvement of their beneficiaries' and/or clients' material conditions and can be seen as a project of social change (Bornstein, 2007) by tackling the root of social problems, campaigning for certain values, and consequently acting on the symbolic dimensions that support a morally legitimate action standard.

In this sense, social change led by TSOs displays a locally based configuration; a slow rhythm; a relational, pedagogical, and inclusive logic that is materialized in a learning process capable of gradually transforming ethical principles, habits, behaviours, and attitudes with the actors' informed and participated consent.

Another key-component of moral legitimacy related to the previous one is, therefore, an active normative posture through continuous advocacy of certain values and causes. This implies the promotion of certain political demands and positions next to stakeholders and the general

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[5] "Web 2.0 is a term created in 2004 by the American company O'Reilly Media to refer a second generation of communities and services based on the idea of the "Web as platform", involving wikis, applications based on folksonomy, social networks, and information technology." This way, it implies a change in the way the Internet is perceived given the interaction and participation environment that currently encompasses innumerous languages. Source: http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0. Access: April 22, 2012.

public, which are based on a specific ethical-moral paradigm. Such work takes place essentially in the communication field and involves leading and fighting for an informed, normative, and symbolic discussion within a constructive setting. So, the power that TSOs must mobilize seems to rest on their role as representatives of citizenship, or the so-called (Global) Civil Society (Keane, 2003).

Regarding what we called an informed discussion, and especially the kind of space that could host it, we think it is possible, through external communication and the use of ICTs to produce true public spheres in the habermasian sense. In other words, TSOs can promote spaces for a communicative action of a universalist feature, free from domination, and facilitate the incorporation of new and emancipated roles (Siebeneichler, 1989).

Lamy and Cardoso (2011) emphasize and adapt these ideas to the contemporary world. They defend that the new media, in general, and social networks, in particular, foster a new way of debating that is different from that of traditional media and can become spaces of free social interaction where opinions are exchanged and new opportunities for autonomy emerge. In short, they represent a new form of civic participation. Consequently, TSOs may accomplish more than the dissemination of values and knowledge; based on the latter, they can build and support the development of a virtual community.

Everybody's participation, interaction, and cooperation under assumptions of trust and in an open communication environment that suits reciprocal understanding and enables the stimulation of the community's life are the pillars on which the virtual community can be constructed.

In some cases, the virtual community leads its users to feel responsible for solving the problems that have been identified (Henriques & Neto, 2001). For this to happen, it is necessary to initiate tangible actions in the field, focusing on the real contexts and practices from which social needs or problems emerge (Henriques & Neto, 2001; Peruzzo, 2002; Recuero, 2004).

In this sense, it is important to emphasize the necessary bridging between the virtual community and actual practice, that is, TSOs must ensure that the actions of the virtual community are not exhausted within cyberspace but actually permeate daily practices in the physical world (Peruzzo, 2002; Recuero, 2004).

In short, external communication addressing purposes of moral legitimacy lies on:

1. The dissemination of values, knowledge, or life-stories that draw people and institutions to the institutional cause. This involves sensitizing for a specific cause or action, creating the conditions for a culture of emancipation and displaying a pedagogical culture regarding the way certain social problems and/or concerns become part of the "political and social agenda of the day";
2. Setting a virtual community through dialogue enhancement and the inclusion of different stakeholders in informed discussions about matters, causes and promoted actions. This way, a capital of influence is produced that rests on processes of democratic joint participation. This allows the member of the virtual community to be both the producer and consumer of information aimed at social criticism, community praxis, and empowerment.

The last type of organizational legitimacy – cognitive legitimacy – operates on a more subtle and profound level. It refers particularly to the degree of coherency credited to the organization's practices and involves expectations about the latter (Suchman, 1995). If the

organization's practices are perceived as congruent with a certain normative system, they raise a set of beliefs that are taken at face value, that is, its activity appears to be predictable, visible, significant, and friendly (Suchman, 1995).

On their turn, stakeholders that invest their resources in a TSO, especially philanthropists and social investors, always look for organizational information far beyond its mission and goals (Salamon, 2003): they want some kind of revenue and they want the latter to match their current expectations (Dart, 2004; Nicholls & Cho, 2006).

Although some literature points out that intentions are usually more important for TSOS than results (Goodin, 2003), in fact, more and more stakeholders demand faithful monitoring and evaluation of the effects or impacts of the projects they sponsor (Salamon, 2002). Sponsoring is less and less understood simply as a philanthropic action and more as a social investment in a virtually market-like context. This new way of conceiving and doing is intimately linked to results and impact assessment, that is, to accountability. As such, the counterpart of investment will simultaneously serve as a subject-matter and as a mandate to act (Suchman, 1995). However, given the Third Sector's characteristics, accountability is far from being simple and thus raises some important challenges.

The heterogeneity of the Third Sector both in terms of its scope and activities, or even the kind of relationship with civil society tends to lead TSOs to engender diverse, different and disparate results. For this reason, the major difficulty can be to find new and common metrics that are able to ponder other, not purely commercial, variables and adequately reflect the more or less tangible dimensions of the value they produce. An example of such approach are the works of Goodin (2003), who proposes an accountability that rests more on intentions than on results, more on solidarity and humanist values than on econometric analyses.

Once again, the specific scope and nature of TSOs influence the strategies of organizational legitimacy and a specific accountability must be accompanied by a specific branding strategy as well. To accomplish this, the organizations' external communication can have a central role in their notoriety through the exploration of the name, brand, logotype as well as other visual, graphic, sound, and oral/written elements such as slogans. In this particular effort, the website[6] is a crucial window of institutional presentation to current and potential stakeholders.

However, the importance of coherency between the form and contents of external communication and the social mission must be emphasized and it requires a strategic and conscious endeavour. As Alessandra Nilo (2008), of the Brazilian Association of Non-Governmental Organizations, shows, it is the causes that need to be strong and these are not commercial products, which means strong brands are a result, not a purpose in themselves. Ritchie, Swami & Weinberg (1999) assume a similar stance, recommending TSOs to conduct a careful analysis of institutional brand management through external communication and to assume that it brings benefits (e.g., signalling quality and reliability; raise in credibility and notoriety; increase in relationship opportunities; positive differentiation regarding other TSOs), as well as risks (e.g., an overly commercial image; resource dislocation from the main activity; institutional representation of controversial political positions).

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[6] By website we understand a set of one or more web pages that share some organizing theme/ principle, interconnected through hypertext (Wallace, 1999).

To conclude, external communication focused on purposes of cognitive legitimacy must contemplate:

1. Setting a distinctive brand through a careful and consistent display of information regarding the organizational identity, the construction/consolidation of its image, the principles, values and causes it stands for;
2. Offering transparent, accessible, and adequate evaluations to stakeholders regarding operational and governance objectives, developed actions, used resources, and results (e.g., qualitative and quantitative data; structural organizational documents; official documentation).

3. ANALYTIC MODEL AND METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

Based on the matters we have described, we conceptualized a direct match between the societal challenges faced by TSOs and the tripartite structure of organizational legitimacy proposed by Suchman (1995) and adopted by Dart (2004) and Nicholls (2006). We assume this is the model that best organizes, in terms of empirical investigation, the most pressing strategic communication decisions currently faced by TSOs since:

1. Pragmatic legitimacy questions TSOs about their actions as to the "how":
    a. *How do we preserve or expand extant services? How do we set, defend or nurture our partnerships and relations? How do we get the funding or manage the necessary incomes to pursue our mission?*
2. Cognitive legitimacy questions TSOs as to the "what":
    a. *What kind of services do we offer? Which institutional image do we want to convey? Who are the audiences we serve and which goals do we pursue? Which results or impacts do we have?*
3. Moral legitimacy questions TSOs as to the "why" of their action:
    a. *Why do we do what we do? Why is our cause important? Why is it necessary to change the current situation?*

Concurrently, we frame the activities of TSOs within the primary social structure of contemporaneity – the network society (Castells, 2000) – since the most promising opportunities for their action are to be found here. Accordingly, it seems obvious that the TSOs' most direct and instrumental space of influence lays primarily on their external communication, using both traditional media and ICTs.

The analytic model shown in Table Table 1 was applied to data from 89 questionnaires filled in by Portuguese TSOs' principals, as well as to website data, during 2011.

Table 1 - External communication analytic model

Societal challenges	Type of organizational legitimacy	Analytic dimensions	Indicators (e.g.)
Material resources attraction and management allowing for a sustainable activity	Pragmatic legitimacy	*Resource attraction*	Campaigning, processes and activities to attract either material or human resources
		Networks and relations	Availability of links or tools to interact, recognize and/or cooperate with similar/peer, political or business organizations
Institutional and political representation of the civil society	Moral legitimacy	*Values and Causes*	Dissemination of information concerning social causes, in general, or concerns or causes advocated by the organization. Availability of updated information, produced either by the institution or by governmental or public sources. Reference to the organization's presence in the media.
		Virtual community	Presence of tools that allow the subject to be simultaneously the producer and consumer of information aimed at social criticism, community praxis and empowerment, such as discussion forums, chat rooms, polls, among other engagement and interactive media.
Quality and effectiveness of social practices	Cognitive legitimacy	*Organizational and/or institutional information*	Dissemination of the organization's mission, history and activities. Presence of multimedia contents and contacts.
		Governance and accountability	Accountability. Information about objectives, results, impacts, sponsoring, funding, donations and/or partnerships. Strategic organizational documents.

Not all dimensions were analysed using both data sources. The questionnaire survey was invaluable to help describe external communication practices in terms of their proximity to more traditional and virtual communication media. This subsequently led us to focus the analysis on the websites, which unlike social networks were commonly used by most organizations – even though more than half of them resorted to the latter.

A first assessment of the institutional communication media used by the 89 organizations to make themselves known to the public and stakeholders highlights the use of ICTs through a

website (92%). With a more reduced, but still considerable adhesion to social networks there were 63,6% of the organizations. Finally, blogs were used by 31,8% of the organizations.

In order to understand the way the TSOs' external communication is managed through virtual media, we have analysed the websites of the 83 organizations (93,3% of all surveyed organizations) that claimed to use this tool and provided the corresponding addresses. Data collection from the organizations' websites took place between the 16th and 23rd of December of 2011. During this period, 5 of the 83 websites were always unavailable, so the overall sample included 78 websites.

Website analysis was designed according to the previously described three types of institutional legitimacy. These were operationalized in six mutually exclusive dimensions, previously coded according to a set of indicators based and/or adapted from the proposals of authors such as Kenix (2007) and Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas (2009).

To the six main analytic dimensions we added another one: *Usability and Accessibility*. The first refers to matters of intuitive and practical organization and use; the second anticipates the website adaptation to publics with some kind of limitation or special need, for example, the possibility of listening to written contents by illiterate or visually disabled users, or the existence of foreign language contents for those who are not familiar with the page's original language. This dimension is pertinent since the presence of gaps that preclude easy navigation can be interpreted as a sign of insensitivity towards special needs or even of organizational opacity, which can lead to the loss of a potential benefactor, associate, or client (Waters, 2007).

The first type of organizational legitimacy to be analysed was pragmatic legitimacy. It corresponds to the axes of *Resources attraction* and *Networks and relations*. Moral legitimacy was evaluated along the axes of *Values and Causes* and *Virtual Community*. Finally, cognitive legitimacy was approached along the axes of *Organizational and/or Institutional Information* and *Governance and Accountability*.

Table 2 shows a systematization of the indicators actually present in the websites. The cases that fulfilled each indicator's content were counted in terms of presence/absence. Subsequently, only presences were counted and submitted to content analysis.

Table 2 - Indicators operationalized according to analytic dimension

Usability and Accessibility Indicators
Page loading takes less than 4 seconds.
The website provides contents in more than one language.
The website mentions accessibility using one of the following options: accessibility certificate (e.g., "Certified Accessibility" logotype of the Knowledge Society Agency (UMIC)[7]; "listening to the text"; announcement that accessibility was accounted for in the website design.
Reference to the year of 2011 is mentioned in the date of the latest news. When there are no news or these are not dated, the website Copyright ("©") date is considered.
The website displays a *Frequently Asked Questions* (FAQ)[8] section.
The website provides a search engine in all its pages.

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[7] Source: http://www.acesso.umic.pt/webax/nota_tecnica_logo.html. Access: May 21, 2012.
[8] FAQ is the acronym for 'Frequently Asked Questions'.

Pragmatic Legitimacy Indicators

Resource attraction	Advertising	The website includes advertisements.
	Commercial orientation	The website allows the sale of products of the organization, or of another origin.
	Online donation	The website provides tools for online donation (e.g., Paypal).
	Offline donation	The website calls for offline donation (e.g., cheque or income tax consignment).
	Finding volunteers	The website has tools to attract volunteers.
	Finding associates	The website has tools to attract associates.
	Employment opportunities	The website publicizes employment opportunities in the organization.
Networks and relations	Similar organizations	The website provides links to similar, i.e., other Third Sector organizations.
	Commercial organizations	The website provides links to commercial, i.e., private business organizations.
	Public institutions	The website provides links to access public, i.e., public sector organizations.

Moral Legitimacy Indicators

Values and Causes	Information about activities	The website offers generic information about the organization's objectives, funders, targeted audience and projects.
	News	The website offers a news section containing diverse information linked to the organization's social mission and activities.
	Public policy information	The website offers information about the defence of certain social causes next to governmental or public institutions.
	Presence in the media	The website offers information about the organization's presence in the mass media.
Virtual Community	Chat	The website offers a tool for one on one conversation, i.e., a chat functionality.
	Petitions	The website offers the possibility to subscribe petitions.
	Forum	The website offers a tool for one on many conversation, i.e., a forum functionality.
	Guestbook	The website offers a space for the user to sign and comment on general or particular aspects, i.e., a guestbook.
	Social network links	The website provides links to its diverse social networks' pages.

Cognitive Legitimacy Indicators

Organizational and/or institutional information	Mission	The website explicitly refers the organization's mission.
	History	The website explicitly refers the organization's history.
	Photo Gallery	The website includes a photo gallery.
	Video Gallery	The website includes a video gallery.
	Events	The website includes a calendar of events or agenda.
	Forthcoming events	The website displays information and/or details concerning forthcoming events.
	Newsletter subscription	The website displays information about the subscription of the newsletter.
	E-mail	The website provides an *e-mail*.
	Telephone	The website provides a telephone number.
Governance & accountability[9]	Accounts report	The website provides access to accounts reports.
	Activity report	The website provides access to activity reports.
	Action plan	The website provides access to action and activity plans or budgets.
	Sponsors	The website mentions funding partners and sponsors.

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[9] For this study, the Accounts and Activity Reports and the Action Plan were considered separately. However, some of the available documents mingled the Accounts and Activity Reports, and in fewer cases the same thing happened with the Action Plan and the Budget.

In the following sections, based on the empirical data, we try to identify signs or evidence of strategic actions linked to external communication practices concerning the different axes of operationalization of the three types of organizational legitimacy.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Usability and accessibility

The results from the *Usability and accessibility* indicators (Table 3) show that nearly all websites promptly load the contents of the initial page; only 2 (2,6%) take more than 4 seconds to process the whole content.

However, not all data correspond to such a positive standard. In fact, almost half the websites had not been updated in 2011 (43,6%), more than half did not provide a search engine (55,1%) and only 14,1% showed a *FAQ* section.

Regarding accessibility, only 4 organizations (5,1%) showed such concern when the website was designed and were available to introduce changes in its architecture should any user experience difficulties[10].

Table 3 - Usability and accessibility indicators [a)]

	N	%
Quick loading	76	97,4
Language option	13	16,7
Accessibility	4	5,1
Updated in 2011	44	56,4
FAQ	11	14,1
Search engine	35	44,9

N= 78

Also, few organizations display the page contents in more than one language: only 13 (16,7%) do so and they all favour English. Still, the fact that this functionality is more used by organizations with an international scope than by those with a national or local one (57,1% of the first ones against 15,8% and 6,5%, respectively) is not surprising.

4.2. Pragmatic legitimacy

Empirical data regarding pragmatic legitimacy are shown in Table 4. The analysis of the *Resources attraction* indicators shows that none of the organizations resorts to advertisements in the website. All references to business companies – logo or name, with or without a link to their websites – name them as "partners" or "sponsors" and they are never displayed as paid publicity (Table 4).

Concerning the classic case of creating revenue through commercial orientation, namely sales of items usually manufactured by the users of the organization's franchised services or products, there were some examples of online sales. Approximately one out of five

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[10] In several sites it is possible to read: "In this website design, an effort was made to enhance all its users' accessibility, including people with special needs. However, should you find any difficulty to access or navigate this website, contact us […] and tell us about the difficulties you have experienced" (Source: Sítio da Quinta Essência. Online: http://www.quintaessencia.pt/; access, January 10, 2013.)

organizations allows sales through their website, which points to a growing comfort with this type of income generating practice.

Table 4 – Pragmatic legitimacy according to analytic axes and indicators

Indicators		N	%
Resource attraction	Advertising	0	-
	Commercial orientation	16	20,5
	Online donation	13	16,7
	Offline donation	8	10,3
	Attracting volunteers	30	38,5
	Attracting associates	31	39,7
	Employment opportunities	33	42,3
Networks and relations	Similar organizations	37	47,4
	Commercial organizations	12	15,4
	Public institutions	30	38,5
			N= 78

The importance of donations to attract financial resources cannot be neglected. Among the latter, we discriminated between online and offline donations since each have their own specificities. However, this is an underused asset: offline donations appear only in 8 websites (10,3%) whereas online donations appear in 13 (16,7%).

More important than attracting donations is to attract associates or volunteers, both present in about 40% of the websites. Assuming that the website offers the opportunity for an individual to link him/herself with others who are not interlinked, this seems to be an interesting way to recruit associates or volunteers because it reaches a potential and otherwise remote public. Attracting associates, when successful, also represents a form of cash inflow through fees.

Finally, attracting volunteers through the website is almost as common as human resource recruiting by publicising employment opportunities (38,5% and 42,3%, respectively).

Regarding *Networks and Relations*, the number of TSOs that use their websites to provide external links does not reach 50%. Among these, organizations that share the hyperlink with another similar organisation are clearly predominant, followed by those that share a hyperlink with a public institution. Those that display a hyperlink with a private commercial company are residual (Table 4).

4.3. Moral legitimacy

The analytic items of moral legitimacy present in the TSOs' websites (Table 5), unequivocally demonstrate that almost all of them mention the organization's activities (93,6%), be it information about the social cause they pursue or the projects and activities related to the latter. Here, a simple quantitative occurrence analysis is a reductionist endeavour since the fact that 73 organizations offer information about their cause, projects, and activities does not show how such information is conveyed, its specific contents or regular updating.

Still regarding the analytic dimension of *Values and causes*, 61,5% of the websites do, in fact, offer a section with news about the organization and its activity. Finally, only 6,4% of the organizations offer information from governmental or public sources, which points to a lack of formative and informative concerns in the website.

Table 5 - Moral legitimacy according to analytic axes and indicators

	Indicators	N	%
Values and causes	Activity information	73	93,6
	News	48	61,5
	Governmental information	5	6,4
	Organization presence in the media	18	23,1
Virtual community	Chat	0	-
	Petitions	0	-
	Forum	3	3,6
	Guestbook	2	2,4
	Links to social networks	34	43,6
			N= 78

Regarding the *Virtual Community* dimension, the several indicators of participation and interactivity show residual values (Table 5): none of the websites has a chat or refers to online petitions; only 3 websites have a discussion forum (3,6%); and 2 websites provide a guestbook (2,4%). Additionally, of the 3 websites with a discussion forum, in 2 cases it is unavailable; and among those that provide a guestbook, stakeholders' comments do not reach 10.

Despite interactivity with the community through the website being practically inexistent, the exception lays in the link to the pages of social networks where, in principle, more and better tools can be explored to attain the goals of participation and interactivity with the stakeholders and the general public. Among all indicators of this analytic axis, reference to the organizations' pages in social networks is the most frequent – almost half the organizations (43,6%) provide links to their pages and among them the vast majority display links to Facebook profiles (Table).

4.4. Cognitive legitimacy

The *Governance and accountability* dimension can be analysed in light of the controversy between the accountability discourse and actual practices. Of the 89 organizations that were surveyed, a vast majority (88,8%) claimed to answer to third or stakeholders regarding their social, economic, and environmental performance. Nonetheless, none mentioned using the specific methodologies pointed in literature, particularly the Social Audit Network (SAN) to measure social impacts (Kay, 2011) or the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), which is more linked to matters of corporate sustainability and social responsibility (Carvalho & Siqueira, 2008). Among the possible forms of accountability, nearly half the organizations (47,4%) claimed to use the Activity and/or Accounts Report for such purpose, whereas a significant number resorted either to the Reports required by tutelary entities (34,2%), or to economic performance Reports designed for funders, associates and other stakeholders (32,9%).

Similarly, among the organizations' official documents available in the websites (Table 6), the most common is the Activity Report that is provided by 37,2% of the organizations, followed by the Accounts Report (33,3%) and the Action Plan (26,9%). Regarding references to funding partners and/or institutions, the information can be found in little less than half the websites (46,2%).

Still regarding the analytic dimension of *Governance and accountability*, the organizations' practices differ according to their legal status: among NGOs, 55,6% provide Accounts Reports, 61,1% Activity Reports, and 44,4% Action Plans. In contrast, only 28,6% of the Private Institutions of Social Solidarity (IPSS) provide Accounts Reports, 34,3% offer Activity Reports, and 22,9% present Action Plans.

Table 6 - Cognitive legitimacy according to analytic axes and indicators

	Indicators	N	%
Governance & accountability	Accounts Report	27	33,3
	Activity Report	30	37,2
	Action Plan	22	26,9
	Sponsors	36	46,2
Organizational and/or institutional information	Mission	36	46,2
	History	44	56,4
	Photo gallery	25	32,1
	Video gallery	9	11,5
	Events	16	20,5
	Forthcoming events	20	25,6
	Newsletter subscription	38	48,7
	E-mail	72	92,3
	Telephone	76	97,4
			N= 78

Considering the *Organizational and/or institutional information* axis, we start by analysing two cornerstones of a TSO's presentation of information: those referring to their Mission and History. 46,2% of the websites explicitly mention the first and 56,4%, the second (Table 6).

Considering the availability of photo and video galleries, around 1/3 of the organizations have a photo gallery (32,1%) whereas little more than 1/10 (11,5%) have a video gallery.

Although events are an important part of organizational activity, Table 6 shows that only 20,5% of the organizations show a Calendar of Events. In contrast, there were more positive signs concerning the use and promotion of a newsletter: 48,7% of the websites mention the possibility of subscribing the organization's newsletter. Regarding contact information and location, most organizations provide their e-mail address (92,3%) and telephone number (97,4%) (Table 6).

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have argued that TSOs can achieve increased pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy by using ICTs to communicate with their stakeholders and the general public. The analysis highlights the importance they ascribe to external communication. In most cases, however, a specialized department to care for the latter's planning, management, and improvement is inexistent. In other words, despite the presence of a set of indicators that reveals a tendency to be present in diverse virtual channels, such presence does not appear to be strategic, planned or systematic.

Between the paradox of "being present" and enjoying the potential that external communication may represent, the use of ICTs was especially patent in the strong use of websites. However, the way this is done does not always allow the organizations to fully benefit from their potentialities, thus revealing some ambiguities in terms of efficacy. In other words, the analysis shows a clear appropriation of this media as a means to publicise the organization. But the investment on usability functions was more reduced even if the website worked as the organization's visiting card. If, on one side, the requisites of instantaneity and urgency are fulfilled with a quick tour through the first page, on the other, the vast majority of organizations risks not being able to communicate with a part of their audience (Kenix, 2007: 81-82) because, with few exceptions, concerns with the access of physically or cognitively disabled people are absent.

Additionally, the fact that TSOs are communicating through new channels is not followed by the regular update of online contents. This shows that external communication is not strategically considered as an investment with a (potentially) positive return. This is congruent with the idea of a restrict public that seems to prevail among TSOs whose most systematic and direct communication addresses funders, often the State. So, there is not a clear investment on the organization's image, or in offering an appreciable, easily reached volume of organizational information to a larger audience. And such factors are crucial to extend social support and diversify stakeholders.

This analysis of the construction, preservation or extension of organizational legitimacy has an exploratory character. For this reason, all claims should be read more as reflexion clues than as generalizations. We are aware of research limits when attempting to apply a complex theoretical frame to a limited number of TSOs. Bearing this in mind, we can say that, generically, TSOs do not display a strategy addressed to the types of legitimacy and dimensions that are considered fundamental in literature, despite some interesting results.

The organizations' moral legitimacy is scarcely expressive, which invalidates the idea conveyed by authors such as Goodin (2003) and Nicholls (2006) who point to its increased urgency for TSOs in face of the sector's vocation and normative pattern. From this emerges the absence of a more subliminal and pedagogical communication with the general population. The latter is not called to participate as much as it could because it is not informed about the importance of these organizations' *raison d'être* and actions taken towards disadvantaged and vulnerable people. In this domain, the use of social networks, that the majority of the sample already resorts to, is a positive feature in the foundation of moral legitimacy as described. Also, it has the additional advantages of demanding only basic user competencies (contrasting with website operations that require proficiency in specialized technical tools) and of being accomplished from and through networking. Since producing social network contents is substantially easier and more efficient, organizations are able to invest more on this media if, in fact, they intend to be the leaders of civil society in certain fields and to promote certain causes.

Regarding the dimension of cognitive legitimacy, we found very low scores in the online availability of the TSOs' essential documents such as the Accounts Report or the Action Plan. We believe this is a crucial feature of a TSO's governance and accountability. Other indicators are also largely absent, for example, those regarding the organization's mission and history. This way, communication with the stakeholders, namely potential funders, allows the organization to draw little benefit from the website since the latter is not used as a support to convey simple and clear information regarding its economic, social, and environmental performance.

One of the third sector's controversial topics is doubtlessly the economic sustainability of TSOs. As pressures to develop specific strategies to generate revenue and gain accrued autonomy and self-sufficiency are mounting, one can say that the new business models brought by ICTs are not yet present in the communication media used by the TSOs we have analysed. We consider that innovative and entrepreneurial organizations may redirect their *modus operandi* to creating opportunities to increase revenues through the use of online commerce or donations. However, this research proves the difficulty to adapt non-profit organizations to new market approaches. This is also obvious in the lack of relationships with private companies, and consequently in the renunciation to the potential synergies that might emerge from a mutually beneficial relation. Possible explanations for this surely include the novelty of such tools, as well as eventual resistances to their full and strategic implementation.

In conclusion, we would like to recall that these results do not provide a full picture of the TSOs' external communication. In fact, many of them do attend to matters such as the presentation of some impacts, the dissemination of institutional information or the announcement of networks, relations and partnerships. However, deficiencies in external communication seem to result from implementation difficulties. The most demanding tools, such as blogs or printed publications are the least used. As the results show, the use of websites and social networks could be vastly improved. But despite operational difficulties, we do not conclude that the TSOs have alienated their social role or kept distant from the expectations that surround their activities. We reckon that they are simply too constrained in their daily lives to be able to consider the possibility of putting forth a solid investment in this area.

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