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RESEARCH PAPER

NGO 'Screen-Being' and Stakeholder Engagement: A 'Wicked Problem'?

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Abstract Ample survey research and content analysis has established that NGO internet presence is qualitatively weak and characterized by the dominance of asymmetrical communication. We argue that the emergent communicative and social paradigm of on-line interaction forms what could be defined as a wicked problem. NGOs, seen as a 'sender' of information, may well face a crisis of accountability determined by the very nature of the media; whereas the NGOs' 'information receivers' often are deprived of the very possibility of stakeholder relatedness. In the internet-based/on-screen 'universe', information and electronic flow are assumed to be continual, which supersedes the entity logic crucial to NGO accountability and legitimacy. In designing their social media presence, NGOs may, therefore, face an impossible challenge.

Informed by Stéphane Vial's analysis of the nature of on-line interactive media, we evaluate these conundrums. Then, inspired by Lucas Introna and Fernando Ilharco, we question the dialogic potential to 'screen-being'. While the shift from an 'actor-centric' to 'flow-oriented' paradigm of 'screen-being' is inherent to digital communication, it destabilizes the entity-grounded accountability of NGO legitimacy. Hence, we end with explicating the risks to dialogic relatedness of 'sceen being' for NGOs. By so doing, we challenge the oft vocalized perspective that NGOs 'just' have to increase their digital communications in order to improve their relations with various stakeholders.

Keywords Accountability · NGO · Wicked problems · Digitalization · Being 'on-screen'

Introduction

> The internet is a medium, not a message. The technology does not of itself change the quality of the arguments presented … but by making certain kinds of information more widely available, the Internet changes the balance of power between NGOs, companies and governments. … NGOs have been swift to make full use of the Internet … first as a source of information but, secondly – and more importantly – as a means of co-ordinating their activities regionally, nationally and internationally. … Advocacy groups are alert to the Web's potential as a source of information …the Internet facilitates many existing NGO activities, such as organizing petitions, as well as making it easier to share information between allied groups and their supporters. The new technology also makes it possible to conduct new kinds of campaign, such as 'electronic direct action'. (Bray, 1998 p. 115)

Critique of NGOs' internet presence has mostly focused on implementation issues (e.g. Gray et al., 2021; Selivanova, 2023), with some recent work directed to the media themselves (García-Orosa & Pérez-Seijo, 2020; Surva, 2023). It has commonly been assumed that greater NGO

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accountability will develop from enhanced media use (Chu & Luke, 2021; Saxton & Guo, 2011). Numerous researchers find few NGOs implement a successful internet presence (e.g. Campbell & Lambright, 2019; Chu & Luke, 2021; Saxton & Guo, 2011); and we wonder why that is? How is digitalized accountability being made accountable, and what can we learn from particular viewpoints in the literature? Our goal is not to call for NGOs to overcome their resistance to new media (e.g. Chu & Luke, 2021), but to examine the claim that digitalization leads to beneficial stakeholder engagement (e.g. Xu & Saxton, 2019). Hence, our research question is 'Do the technologies of digitalization used by NGOs really afford participatory and democratic interaction that can discharge ethical accountability?' If these technologies do not, we ask 'Could digitalization's implementation be seen as a 'wicked problem'?'

Recent years have witnessed increasing calls for NGOs to discharge greater dialogic accountability that empowers beneficiaries (e.g. Hengevoss, 2023; Kennedy, 2019; Kingston et al., 2019). In addition to enhanced transparency, the literature argues that NGOs can protect their independence by increasing their accountability to their beneficiaries through empowerment and dialogue (Dewi et al., 2021; Kingston et al., 2019). These calls require that NGOs enable stakeholders to challenge and exert influence on organizational processes by effectively participating through dialogue (Brown, 2009). Saxton and Guo (2011) have asserted that the internet enables both disclosure and dialogue, and constitutes a powerful means for NGOs to communicate with their followers. Research into NGOs' uses of internet-based communication (e.g. Chu & Luke, 2021; Gray et al., 2021; Guo & Saxton, 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2012; Saxton & Guo, 2011; Selivanova, 2022; Xu & Saxton, 2019) has claimed that: (i) NGOs insufficiently exploit the interactive possibilities of contemporary on-screen communication; and (ii) NGOs' effectiveness and legitimacy is/will be threatened by their failure to make use of these digital possibilities. Commonly, research has utilized survey-based investigation and quantitative content analysis to poll attitudes and/or quantify NGOs' internet presence. Generally, this research concludes that NGOs must adapt and increase their electronic communication to establish and maintain their legitimacy (Campbell & Lambright, 2019; Chu & Luke, 2021). Research also often assumes that digital presence can be equated with dialogic engagement; we will argue later in this paper that this assumption is ill-placed.

We consider NGOs and digitalization in a general sense (rather than as specific media) and draw on extant literature on NGO accountability. Thereafter, we examine how NGOs tend to frame their internet presence. Central to an NGO's *raison d'être*[1] is connecting the 'here' of its home-base and donors, with the 'there' of (needy) beneficiaries. The extant digitalization literature mainly seems to stress what is not happening—i.e. stakeholder engagement and democratization; but what *is* happening? We pose the dilemmas of 'being-on screen' and digitalization through the lens of Stéphane Vial's (2018, 2019) work. We argue that there is an existential crisis in 'screen-being' which, for instance, Lucas Introna and others (e.g. Baygi et al., 2022; Introna & Ilharco, 2006; Introna & Whittaker, 2006) have explored in two steps; resulting in a logic of 'everything flows' (this will be described in Sect. "A 'Wicked Problem' (Or Worse)"). Our analysis questions the possibility of entity-grounded NGO accountability highlighted by this theorization. Accountability's very possibility may be 'liquified' on-screen via digitalization, effectively destroying legitimacy and thereby the very possibility for its 'being'. We will develop our argument in the following six sections, the content of we signal in each section.

NGO Ethics of Relatedness

NGO legitimay depends on social accountability (Hengevoss, 2023; Kennedy, 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2012). The ethics underpinning NGO legitimacy requires them to (attempt to) engage in constructive dialogue with their Other; i.e. to be transparent, open and participative to their followers and donors (Dewi et al., 2021; Kingston et al., 2019). Roberts (1991, 2012, 2018) argues that someone can be accountable only when they hear the call to acknowledge, respond to and enjoin with the Other. This requires that NGOs, their followers and donors, are responsive to one another, thereby constituting the necessary social responsibility (see also García-Orosa & Pérez-Seijo, 2020). This requires NGO policy and action to be grounded in a fundamental openness to their Other (Agyemang, 2023). It is an existential necessity for NGOs to '…reject the individualization of responsibility that is both the premise of, and justification for, neoliberal policies that unequally distribute the rewards and risks of social activity' (Butler, 2015, p.6).

Accountability via the acknowledgement of the Other underpins the activity by NGOs to build sustainable long-term relationships with their funders, beneficiaries and followers (Rodríguez et al., 2012; Saxton & Guo, 2011). Prior literature has long critiqued vertical accountability between donors, NGOs and beneficiaries as being deeply dysfunctional (Agyemang et al., 2023; Cordery et al., 2019, 2023; Dewi et al., 2021; Ebrahim, 2003). Powerful donors driven by mistrust, typically demands detailed NGO

[1] Though the 'here/there' pattern still exists; many NGO projects currently take place in the rich areas of North America and Europe.

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reporting that takes resources away from populations in most need of help; this is exacerbated as donor/funders' project goals are seldom developed in dialogue with the field, and aid politics often refuse to permit failures to be acknowledged (Hengevoss, 2023; Kennedy, 2019). Driven by the fear of losing funding, NGOs become less innovative, learning is likely to be stymied, resulting in beneficiary accountability that is limited and ineffective (Dewi et al., 2021). Such accountability may be reduced to an accounting exercise, rather than an exchange of ideas, impressions and reflections (Brown, 2009; Dewi et al., 2021; Kingston et al., 2019) aiming to improve the lives of beneficiaries.

Substantive accountability includes funders and NGOs listening and working with staff and beneficiaries to define aid goals, a commitment to learning and understanding, while attending to organizational and staff safety and well-being (Agyemang, 2023; Cordery et al., 2019; Dewi et al., 2021; García-Orosa & Pérez-Seijo, 2020; Kingston et al., 2019). NGO accountability thus extends beyond mere stakeholder engagement.

The philosophy of Levinas (1969) enables us to illuminate the ethics of NGO inter-relatedness. Levinas (1969) maintains that social relations are and must be primarily grounded in face-to-face interaction (see also Rhodes, 2020). One engages with the Other by experiencing their face, which prompts an ethical obligation for care, accommodation, answerability and responsibility to the Other. When someone gets in touch with another individual by (literally) experiencing their face, responsibility for the Other is automatically invoked. Levinas thus gives ontological status to human relatedness as the basis of ethics, which he regards as the first principle of philosophy. Only then, Levinas believes, can in-depth experience of 'self' occur (i.e. through the Other). Experience and recognition of affect grounds 'care', 'love', 'accountability' and 're-sponsibility' (Brown, 2009; Roberts, 1991). For relationships to blossom and be maintained, basic existential acknowledgement of Other and thereby awareness of 'self' should be treated as a common 'good', leading to 'ethical accountability'. Levinas thus situates ethics in a direct, interpersonal encounter and emphasizes infinite responsibility and the transcendence of the Other. He calls for a continuous re-evaluation of our actions and attitudes towards others based on how the relationship develops, advocating ethical attentiveness and humility. The need to respect the alterity (otherness) of the Other is stressed, which implies maintaining an infinite, open-ended relationship that never seeks to dominate or totalize the Other. In part, this view is captured by the literature on downward accountability (e.g. see Chu & Luke, 2021, 2022), but then typically a framework is developed, or the importance, therefore, is argued, stipulating how accountability should be discharged. However, the infinity Levinas pleads for would not be completely in line with such an approach. In Levinas' view, true ethical accountability and responsibility involves an openness to the Other, an acceptance of the Other's difference and otherness without reduction to the self's terms. Only a very open-ended framework that is continuously discussed would come close to what Levinas proposes, as long as the framework does not dominate the encounter with Other.

We question whether NGOs can discharge their ethical accountability through digitalization wherein individualization potentially threatens the existential and basic NGO paradigm. The ethics underpinning interactive relatedness surpasses the pragmatics of gaining more donations or of framing accountability primarily in financial terms. Yet, pragmatism often determines NGOs' communication strategies (including the internet). We argue that an NGO must embrace an ethics of genuine relatedness as fundamental to its identity, if it is to create and maintain horizontal stakeholder engagement. We question whether digitalization fosters or impairs such necessities.

NGO Interactivity On-Line

Many researchers have argued or assumed that on-line communication, based on internet technology, can strengthen NGO legitimacy, safeguard legitimacy and boost attractiveness (Campbell & Lambright, 2019; Chu & Luke, 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2012). It is expected that NGOs will provide useful information via their websites—yet the nature and quality of this information is generally unspecified and in practice varies enormously (e.g. Chu & Luke, 2021; Dewi et al., 2021; Guo & Saxton, 2020; Neu et al., 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2012; Saxton & Guo, 2011; Xu & Saxton, 2019). Extant NGO research indicates that it is uncommon for internet interaction (e.g. via social media) to achieve constructive and consequential accountability and/or governance (García-Orosa & Pérez-Seijo, 2020; Selivanova, 2023). Following Bray (2000), we argue that the fault may not lie with NGOs resisting greater internet presence, but that the media of the internet may be at fault—i.e. these media may be problematic for discharging ethical accountability (see also, e.g. Selivanova, 2023).

For an NGO to dialogue with its (electronic) Others and to effectuate ethical accountability, two-way mechanisms, with built-in interactivity and participatory possibilities, are needed (Campbell & Lambright, 2019; Saxton & Guo, 2011). Research shows that few NGOs successfully discharge their accountability via two-way interactive websites, although this sometimes happens via social media, for example, in the case of social media campaigns. While not unambiguously positive examples, such campaigns

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represent a more active internet presence among consumers of media, and can be seen as a form of accountability (Campbell & Lambright, 2019; Chu & Luke, 2021; García-Orosa & Pérez-Seijo, 2020; Saxton & Guo, 2011). One example hereof is the #ShareTheMeal campaign of the World Food Programme (WFP), which intends to combat global hunger by leveraging the power of social media to encourage donations. Followers are actively encouraged to share their meal photos and tag the campaign in their own news feeds on social media, creating a sense of community and shared purpose. However, this is the main way in which followers are enabled to 'correspond' in the context of the campaign, which means that their internet presence is highly structured and pretty much preset. Even so, we feel it may be claimed that this example is more of an exception than a general rule, and that NGO website accountability often fails to be relationally focused; that is, to invite participation and discussion, the aforementioned counterexample notwithstanding. Frequent calls for co-creation, or greater NGO digital engagement and participation with contributors, beneficiaries and the wider public, have not always met with success (Campbell & Lambright, 2019; Chu & Luke, 2021). By digitally opening themselves to shared responsibility and action, it is possible for NGOs to gain attachment and commitment with the publics who are their *raison d'être* (Vial, 2010, 2018). Nevertheless, in the very act of opening up to their Others, NGOs risk losing control of their own identity; if the Other is genuinely to become engaged (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). There is a (potential) conflict here between the NGOs' professed goals of openness and relatedness, and the need for orderly action and stability; a conflict that we believe is mirrored in digital communicative behaviour.

Two-way internet communication supposedly can facilitate meeting the Other and support social relations via horizontal interaction. As donors seek NGO recognition of their donations, they may want to impact the NGO's agenda (Chu & Luke, 2021; Hengevoss, 2023); hence, such internet communication can enable NGOs to create a 'we' with its donors, followers and commentators. But (as noted) if an NGO's internet presence achieves genuine relational participation, it may threaten the NGO's routines, operations and even continuity. Opening to discussion and co-creation, means one cannot be 'in control' of the results (Brown, 2009). If an NGO requires control over its communication, it will not embrace dialogue to the greatest possible extent (Vial, 2010, 2018). Additionally, the NGO's (potential) on-line public faces comparable challenges to being dialogically accessible to the Other. Obsessed by gaming, hypnotized by our mobile phones, we may be fundamentally alienated from the Other and thereby from ourselves. Operationalizing ethical relatedness between the NGO and its Others on-line is thus fraught. Digitalization creates connectedness but does it support ethical accountability through dialogic interactivity?

Digital Affordances for NGOs

The ethical potential of digitalization emanates from its ability for co-creation, wherein NGO connectivity with its Others is possible more quickly, visibly and frequently than with traditional media (Agyemang, 2023; Brown, 2009; Xu & Saxton, 2019). On-line presence can provide immediacy and directness, enabling prominance and relevance, and thus contribute to NGO accountability (Cordery et al., 2023). Nevertheless, being visible on-line can also potentially meet with uncontrolled attacks of anger, protest and vilification (Armitage, 2001). But the question remains whether digitalization can be designed to support ethical relatedness without the classic dependence on face-to-face meeting with the Other (Vial, 2018, 2019). These affordances of on-line communication have been contested (Mora et al., 2021). What communication design intends may not match users' impressions and idea(l)s. At issue is what interactive digital media really are 'affording' if what technology designers intend and what the users actually gain from their interaction are not to be at extreme odds. Norman (1988, 1990) described how affordances can assume a fairly ugly social–political form: Low-lying bridges were built over New York motorways so that buses could not pass under them. Poor people were, therefore, denied access to nearby beaches. Social arrangements were consciously designed into the (bridge) objects to afford prejudice. Linked to NGO digitalization, this leads to the question of whether NGO digitalization affords stakeholder engagement; is ethical accountability being designed-in or designed-out?

The extant NGO digitalization literature stresses NGO effectiveness, legitimacy and accountability, mainly to beneficiaries (Cordery et al., 2023). It, therefore, seems to be assumed that the 'technology affordance' or what digitalization has to offer is self-evident (Mora et al., 2021). Bray (2000), for example, is typical of prior literature that assumes any failures of NGOs to communicate information and coordinate action successfully on-line are a result of poor design or a lack of commitment to a two-way digital strategy. While Bray (2000) concludes that NGOs are not realizing the potential of on-line communication, there may be good reasons for technology resistance. In the relationship between NGOs and digitalization, the assumption has been that the NGOs are failing to make sufficient use of interactive digital media (e.g. Chu & Luke, 2021; Guo & Saxton, 2020; Neu et al., 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2012; Saxton & Guo, 2011; Xu & Saxton, 2019). Yet, what is it

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about that the underlying technology that could be the cause? Even allowing for the resource-intensive nature of implementing a new technology, we posit that the media may fail to be compatible with NGOs' needs. Instead of assuming that on-screen media are something positive and that the NGOs are merely resisting change; we ask how desirable the changes required to be on-screen are, i.e.: 'Do the technologies of digitalization really afford participatory and democratic interaction such as would discharge ethical accountability?' The previous literature suggests that NGOs are typically not 'public-centred' but 'organization-centred' (Johnston & Taylor, 2018). This literature has explicitly addressed their limited digital stakeholder engagement on organizational power dynamics (e.g. Dewei et al., 2021). Hence, researchers have stated that the technology affords the mutuality of interaction which NGOs then fail to embrace (Chu & Luke, 20,121; Saxton & Guo, 2011). Assumptions that digitalization has a dialogic purposiveness is thus based on two assumptions: (i) An ethics of empathetic and authentic relatedness is inherent to NGO legitimacy (Rodríguez et al., 2012); and (ii) the on-line technologies afford substantive engagement and accountability (Xu & Saxton, 2019). We now turn to examining the technological affordances assumed in these claims as they must be questioned.

Making Participatory (Im-)possibilities

Stéphane Vial has argued that the 'digital revolution' is phenomenological; that is, it changes forms of awareness and perception (2018, 2019; Vermaas & Vial, 2018; Vial & Cartoir-Brisson, 2017). As we enter what he terms the 'social media society' we are transmuted. For on-line communication to be accountable, it must reckon with the media's characteristics. Vial (2018, 2019) asserts that pre-mechanical, industrial and digital 'being-in-the-world' are each qualitatively different; and that the differentiation principles must be acknowledged if we are to understand on-line communication. The chief danger of 'digital awareness', according to Vial (2018, 2019), is tunnel vision wherein peripheral awareness is lost and opinionated dogma prevails. The 'aura' of the digital era can, therefore, act as an anathema to human phenomenal being. NGOs almost always try to have an 'aura' of awareness, care, accountability and sensitivity (Bajde et al., 2022). Creating, maintaining, communicating and sharing that 'aura' in the digital context is a challenge. NGOs must maintain their 'aura' in any communication to generate the needed willingness to act in the Other. Not to fall into deep performative contradiction, NGOs have to make things happen without domination, manipulation or simply forcing the Other to do what they want.

Vial (2019) offers several proposals that address and highlight an NGO's awareness of its own 'aura'.[2] These proposals are important in considering how (or whether) an NGO on-line can be sensitive and accountable to its Other and if digitalization can afford participatory and democratic interaction in discharging ethical accountability. We use Vial's (2019) proposals to investigate how social connectedness can or cannot be framed digitally by respecting relatedness with the Other. The proposals entail:

(i) Virtual digital 'reality' is not actual reality. The digital imposes itself via on-screen awareness, which differs from non-digital sensory experience. Thus, it is consequently unjustified to claim 'objective truth' for what is digitally presented. Digital media have enormous communicative potential, but their power adjoins their artificiality. All digital images, texts and material are selected, transposed and contextually elaborated. Accountability for the digital entails responsibilization for what is presented. Choice and ethical awareness of the artificiality of what is digitally presented is necessary and extends to the 'realness' of the objects that are digitally handled as well as to the viewers. A 'photoshopped' reality endangers the phenomenal 'real' and makes accountability tenuous. Digital offerings are products of communicative choices; the prettiest, most persuasive or fashionable content is probably not the most truthful. If one's digital content is determined by marketing considerations rather than via relational integrity, accountability will be thwarted. What counts is the pertinence and responsiveness of the digital content. Digital 'reality' may not be all that real; it actually may be designed to be 'too-good-to-be true'. What is digitally possible can be seductive but less than truthful.

(ii) The digital is a programmed interface. Behind the screen the language comprises sequences of 0's and 1's. The associated constructs are at least somewhat unstable and may not perform as the designers think they should, or how the users want them to. For example: computers crash, programmes become corrupted, viruses attack and malevolent hackers threaten. One does not physically or bodily engage with the code. On the one hand, this is an alienating or distancing dimension to the digital; but paradoxically, it is also what enables digital hyper-relationality (Baudrillard, 1981, 2001; see also Armitage, 2001). Digital material is inherently reactive:

[2] Vial actually offers twelve proposals but we have combined and synthesized their major elements here.

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> I click on a button, and the title of my text is displayed in bold; I click on a link, and my Web browser takes me to the requested page; or I press several keys, and my game console makes me experience driving a car. Therein lies the interactivity because interacting is precisely reacting to a reaction, which causes a new reaction to which we must react again. (Vial, 2019, p. 91)

Vial asserts that the *digital always gives something back,* making it an attention-grabber. Embracing the interactivity of the digital can lead one 'down a rabbit hole'. Digital relationality is seductive; via the absence of what is called 'stasis' (see Jurgenson, 2019). Users can interact with digital material and at least (in principle) recast it, add to it and make it mutable. The invitation for NGOs to engage with and actively relate to stakeholders is potentially a powerful way to create shared identity and to secure a place in a community. But accountable communication must not merely be based on digital artefacts which may prioritize sensationalism rather than dialoguing with stakeholder communities. The relatedness required in ethical accountability may not provide attention-catching communication (e.g. Chu & Luke, 20,121; Saxton & Guo, 2011). That is debate, interaction and two-way relatedness may be ethically appealing but produce less than engaging viewing (Brown, 2009).

(iii) Digital communication can produce simulated realities only. There is always a distance between the circumstantial in situ of our sense organs and what can be experienced 'on-screen'. Just as a good novel can be powerfully evocative and provide a sensation of 'being-there', the digital can be communicatively powerful. But still, what one sees on-line, whether written text or image centred is digitally constructed. The potential gain in relational power and possible intense evocativeness of the digital is achieved at an ethical price. It is a synthetic 'give and take' where the rules of representation are unclear. The image is actual but its reality is uncertain. Who has the power over the image and thus constructs its 'being' is an important question to ask in this context. This may be the NGO; but it may be contracted communication specialists. If the NGO accepts a dialogic relationship to its stakeholders, it becomes unclear how the relationship will proceed. Without control over the content, there is no accountability. Digital dialogue thus creates a complex simulacra of interaction, which because it is not in situ can be rich in possibility but very poor in fact-checking.

(iv) An NGO's chosen plot-line can digitally be interactively destabilized or forced to change. On-line communication can weaken the organization's 'authority'. NGOs can initiate contact via digital content, but the impact of the contact is at least partially indeterminant. Massive resistance, rejection and aggression can ensue. As on-screen is virtually created, what is offered is never phenomenally secure. Maybe storylines and images really looked that way, but maybe they have been reworked to look one way rather than another. Interlocutors may act in good faith and believe what they say; but one cannot be sure. Possibilities of gamification and 'ludification' are present, ultimately helping or hampering communication. The Other can destabilize one's intentions with their suggestions and alternatives. Alternatively, openness can result in 'gamification' in pursuit of greater effect. There is a subtle line between communicative playfulness or creative interaction, and deceit. Hyperbole, imaginative uses of media and strong politically motivated rhetoric are all to be expected; but can be challenging to deal with or keep under control. They can fall flat or even worse create hysterical reactions. One does not really have control over what the audience does with what one presents.

Summarizing these four key dimensions or aspects to digital on-line communication, it: (i) is not phenomenally supported; (ii) is programmed and (iii) is simulated and (iv) its effects may be indeterminant. These dimensions of digitalization thereby invoke issues of designer accountability. On a performative level, ethical accountability requires and NGO to make evident what it expects, demands and hopes for, from its Other. Digital on-line communication can be spontaneous, unpolished and immediate; and hereby less unidimensional than marketing PR (public relations) material. But this is at cost to the NGO 'speaking with power to the donor' as its communication paradigm; which can challenge a management who seeks to control the Other (Brown, 2009).

While Vial (2018, 2019) believes that active support and engagement can be realized via digitalization, he notes that accountability and risk-averse behaviour may collide. This may explain why an ethical two-way NGO

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communication is seldom evidenced (Campbell & Lambright, 2019; Saxton & Guo, 2011). NGOs could make their processes more dialogic, but they may wish to preserve one-way control over the content and connectivity of their communication, limiting effective digitalization.

Ethical accountability could be realized with open access to project-related information, and participatory discussion and evaluation (García-Orosa & Pérez-Seijo, 2020). Project-based transparency would be a giant step towards creating relationships of accountability and acknowledgement of the Other. Yet, in present-day NGO accountability, top-down demands from donors are prioritized over beneficiary accountability, driven by donor misgivings about overheads, field staff behaviour and suspicions of funds' misuse (Ebrahim, 2003). A Levinasian inspired view of accountability assumes an ontology wherein all actants equally deserve respect. Here, we use Vial's (2018, 2019) analysis to clarify digitalization's pros and cons as a means of accountability in dialogic engagement. On-line relatedness as horizontal accountability and as a series of interactive practices may be possible; but examples in the literature are scarce. Top-down and bottom-up accountability in NGO communication in general and digitalization in particular is ethically and pragmatically needed (Brown, 2009; Cordery et al., 2023); but whether this is 'realistic' given the viewpoints we are adopting, we are unsure.

The Crisis of 'Screen-Being' in Technologies' Receivers

How do receivers tend to react to technologies of digitalization? Introna and Ilharco (2006) claim that 'screening' includes all three of significances, i.e. a screen is: (i) shown or displayed on a surface (as in a film, ipad, smart phone, etc.); (ii) an object that protects our space or acts as a boundary (as in a 'fire screen') and (iii) a procedure in the investigation of antecedents or in a security check ('screening' the candidate or the suspect). What is on the screen is assumed to be meaningful, as what appears on screen(s) supposedly is there for a reason. Thereby, one becomes an 'impressable subject' open to whatever has been chosen. When the subject is constituted by its gaze, knowing is looking and seeing. In our visual awareness dominated culture, 'seeing is believing'. Thus, if one can discipline and control the Other's gaze, one can in effect determine their identity or being. The modern subject sees what it finds relevant and meaningful; but by 'seeing on the screen', perception becomes more and more a closed system. When the self is 'self-enclosed', the world becomes a self-referential construct. The subject, so constituted, does not function in terms of the gaze of the Other, but as a captive audience. Introna and Ilharco's (2004, 2011) assertions are not driven by technophobia, but stress that contemporary digital technologies propagate worldviews and lifeworlds orchestrated by the creators, designers and intermediaries that bring them to us. For instance, search engine technologies reward the more powerful and marginalize the Other (see also Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000; Introna & Whittaker, 2006; Introna & Wood, 2004; Introna, 2016).

Prior research has assumed progressive development and implementation of interactive digital communication technologies, with social–ethical reflection being almost a follow-up. However, Introna and Ilharco (2006) categorically reject this approach, insisting that technologies must be understood as inherently social. The technological and ethical are inevitably co-constituting. Technologies attain social ends by technical means; e.g. research, development and production, all involve choices that support and reject ways of being (Introna & Ilharco, 2011, 2023). Some social options are enabled, and others are blocked. Introna and Ilharco call for a 'disclosive ethics' making transparent the principles of inclusion and exclusion assumed in the developing and implementing of technology. They note that inclusion and exclusion are continuous; with existing technologies often reinterpreted and put to unanticipated uses. Processes of 'development' are unending and indeterminant. They seek to follow the interactive relationship between the technical and the social in order to reveal the normative.

Introna and Ilharco argue that digitalization has produced 'life-on-the-screen', limiting attention spans, reducing the breadth and quality of interaction and enclosing people within rigid social structures. These, they claim, are key dimensions of 'screening' rather than accessory aspects. The technologies incorporate and promulgate the Silicon Valley techno-entrepreneur's lifestyle, its politics and values. Life-on-the screen defines a way of being that de facto precludes the more democratic or ethical principle(s) of situational relationality. As the screen grabs and holds the subject's attention, what is apparently relevant is what appears on the screen, rather than via the Other's gaze.

Introna and Ilharco assert that exuberantly embracing internet-based communication, as informationally powerful and institutionally desirable, causes NGOs to miss the point. They assert that the 'screeness' of the screen is important. Screeness implies that the subject's attention via the screen is limited, controlled and disciplined.

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'Screening' is a restrictive form of 'dwelling': assuming an episteme wherein the subject is enacted as positioned and held to what appears to her (or him) on-screen. The subject watches but cannot choose, select or enact. The screen reduces the subject to a 'gazing subject' who is literally 'impressionable'. The subject receives the outputs; the subject has been denied the power to prioritize. In the tradition of McLuhan and Fiore (1969), 'the medium is the massage', digitalized media interaction is itself the key factor. The screen functions as the meaningful location or place to be attended to. The principle is not to allow subject choice, but to hold the subject captive to that which has been made to appear. The subject's positioning is not relational but synchronic. Thereby, interaction is severed; the subject is positioned before the screen, which is 'where it happens'. The media is designed to hold the subject's gaze, whereby the subject does not enter into dialogue or co-creation.

It is inherent to the interactive performativity of dialogic relatedness that it flows in all directions, producing manifold possibilities and relationships. Watching the screen focuses and restricts; the framing is controlled, simplified and limiting. At the airport, for example, we look at the screens to see if our flight is on time and from which gate it is departing. The screen as such is of no interest to us; we simply need to fetch the relevant information to catch our plane. This is the basic model of what Introna and Ilharco call the 'screening' relationship; it is unidirectional (the flight does not catch us, we [hopefully] catch the flight); the media as such is not experienced. We are 'in-formed'—i.e. we are formed to perform in a particular way (i.e. to be on time at the gate). The importance of the screen is that the subject's attention is limited, controlled and disciplined. Claims of the democratizing potential of interactive media insufficiently account for the existential importance of the screen. Attending to screen(s) inherently produces a subject who does not select, talk back or interact. We must not assume that the subject's criteria of judgement can remain (or has remained) unaffected by the technology. But if, as Introna and Ilharco argue, the subject has been othered by communication technologies; the subject that could embrace and understand dialogical being has then ceased to exist.

Introna and Ilharco (2006) examine the effects of 'screening', but do not research the social-technical complex which produces the technology, rather they continue to position ethical assessment as an add-on to the extant development of the technology. They maintain that the awareness of the subject produced by 'life-on-the-screen' is increasingly narrow and takes too little responsibility for its phenomenal awareness. It is (at least partially) governed by targeted messaging. But an archaeology of 'life-on-the-screen' (in the sense of Foucault, 2023) would have to more thoroughly investigate the 'becoming' of such phenomena. 'Screening' has imposed an advertising-based paradigm on digital communication; whereby the viewing subject is made passive and is manipulated. Thus, by imitating the advertising paradigm, NGOs do violence to their own being and identity. The passivity 'screening' engenders is antithetical to involved engagement and to the crucial task of NGOs, which entails linking a 'here' (for instance, of privilege) to a 'there' (for instance, of grinding poverty).

A 'Wicked Problem' (Or Worse)

MIS Quarterly recently published a special issue dedicated to identifying the assumptions necessary for the future theorizing of 'information systems' including 'digitalization'. Baygi et al. (2022) were key contributors to this special issue wherein they developed their 'everything flows' perspective, further radicalizing the critique of 'screening'. They argue that understanding what we call 'digitalization' requires sole attention to flux, becoming and process. Agile awareness and action can adapt alongside the continuous (trans)formative processes of the contemporary. Baygi et al. (2022) debunk attempts to understand technology and society in terms of entities—i.e. in terms of intentionality and affordances. The entity perspective is inadequate to the contemporary logic of becoming. The ethics of the 'gaze', grounded in respect for Other derived from Levinas (1969), is deemed to be entity oriented. The claim made by Baygi et al. (2022) is that continual movement, duration and evolution perpetually lead to multiplicity, conditionality and decentred-ness.

Given that we have argued that the technologies of digitalization used by NGOs seldom affords participatory and democratic interaction to discharge ethical accountability, we apparently see digitalization's implementation as a 'wicked problem'. An NGO problem is that they are entities with rationales and identities—i.e. they exist to make some things happen, and not other things. Our perspective is that NGOs are purposive, allowing evaluation of whether NGO technology use is appropriate. For Baygi et al. (2022), our perspective inadequately understands that reality *is* change. The flows of everyday practices are self-generating and prefigure actors' roles. Correspondence between organizations and events is supposedly intrinsically bound up in 'flowing lines of action', that configure the actants rather than are configured by the actants. Technology and institution engulf one another in open-ended movement. The contemporary connected person and organization are knotted or woven together in co-responsivity. There is 'correspondence' but no 'causality' or 'agency'. Process and movement just 'are'. The unique

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dynamism of the 'meshwork' of inter-relatedness carries society, actants and technologies along. Baygi et al. (2022) thus propose an ontology of 'flow', wherein motion or motility dominate. If Baygi et al. (2022) are right, the *raison d'être* of NGOs will be swept away by the current techno-centred society. Entity thinking that defines a 'here' with wealth and responsibility; and a 'there' that is fraught and demands our support; will be superceded by the logic of the agile, neoliberal entrepreneurial society.

The Baygi et al. (2022) scenario of 'screen-being' poses a 'wicked' problem for NGOs. Wicked problems are unique problems for which: (i) There is no definite formulation (stakeholders cannot agree on the definition); (ii) solutions are not true-or-false, but better-or-worse; (iii) solutions are numerous and, when implemented, change the way to formulate the problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). NGOs' current media technological engagement, we assert, is a wicked problem. As we have noted, prior research criticized NGOs' insufficient or inappropriate use of digitalization without agreement on how implementation should occur or what its results should look like. The calls for interactive, democratic and participative relatedness to include beneficiaries lacks proposals for the translation of these goals into concrete actions or structures (see the literature discussed in Sections 'NGO Ethics of Relatedness' and 'NGO Inter-Activity On-Line'). Dialogic participative accountability may be a solution to NGO/stakeholder relatedness, but we need more clarity of what that would look like. Communication between NGOs and the field (for instance in development projects) is now technologically possible; but why should it be, or not be, used?

How can we define the appropriate moral and societal values to give substance to NGO digital accountability? Using Levinas (1969) as our ethical compass, NGOs should be purposeful in their technological communication choices. But that demands far more attention to the ethics of their communicative roles than observed currently. What is an effective use of media—who is to be reached, with what purpose and in what sense are both parties supposed to be open to one another? Accountability, we believe, entails respect for the Other—but how does one prepare for, implement or evaluate that? The technologizing or digitalizing of dialogic relatedness is a design conundrum. Designing for values may be an NGO necessity, but exactly what and how that should proceed, is unclear.

Obviously, information technologies mediate our relationships and have created a culture that is exceptionally dynamic and powerful. Rittel and Webber's (1973) paper on design and 'wicked problems' stressed problems that cannot be definitively described. While 'tame' problems are like riddles, having a 'right' answer and being 'solvable'; wicked problems persist. How NGOs should interact with their stakeholders via contemporary communication technologies remains indeterminant, requiring refinements in goal formulation, priorities and ethics. It is a wicked problem.

A key problem with 'on-screen' digitalization is that it lacks a clear definition of what NGO systems ought to do. 'Participatory dialogic accountability', for example, is not a specific-enough outcome definition; and the role of information systems and electronic means of communication therein remains unclear. We acknowledge a gap between 'what is' and 'what-ought-to-be'; highlighting why NGO/beneficiary dialogue is weak (e.g. Chu & Luke, 2021; Guo & Saxton, 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2012; Saxton & Guo, 2011; Selivanova, 2023; Xu & Saxton, 2019). Rittel and Webber (1973) encourage the goal of a better understanding of 'wicked problems' such as this one. To design an NGO electronically supported communication strategy that is dialogic, participative and takes accountability into account is to take on an ill-defined problem that will result in ill-defined solutions. Nevertheless, we seek to avoid zero-sum outcomes, wherein the 'ethics' amounts to a summation of individualistic choices; or where a logic of total flux and flow makes ethics irrelevant. With the supposition of a Levinasian approach, we can imagine acts of communication that support the relatedness of the 'public good'. And with this modest agenda, we propose that the further development of NGO technologically supported communicability should proceed.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest Carolyn Cordery is the President Elect of ISTR and is a long-standing ISTR member. No other authors have conflicts of interest.

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