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*Published in:*
Organizational Ethnography

2021

*Document Version:*
Peer reviewed version (aka post-print)

# Reading and interpreting social media: Exploring positive emotional expressions in organizing

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Length of chapter excluding references, figures and tables: 6496

## *Introduction*

> As our world has widened, it has become increasingly difficult to record and interpret it (Czarniawska, 2014, p. 8).

When we enter the 2020:s, digital forms of organizing are permeating almost every concerted form of collective action. The type of organizational digital tools that perhaps have the largest availability for interactions of individuals and organizations alike is social media. In this chapter, we ethnographically try to explore the implications of a specific aspect of social media - positive emotional expressions - by probing into their proliferation and meaning for organizing.

In organization studies, most research on social media and emotions has primarily looked at it as an aspect of specific organizational efforts (cf. Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017), rather than probing into the performative organizational implications that social media platforms in and

of themselves entail beyond any singular organizational experience. In contrast, Gaggiotti, Kostera, and Krzyworzeka (2017) advocate for organizational ethnographers to move beyond the trappings of any one specific organization, and instead focus on the broader context of social organizing. In a sense, this may be seen as a call to ethnographically engage with organizational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Albeit formulated in other words, this is also the argument of Watson (2012), who writes "that we can only create successful organisational ethnographers if, in every study, we give full consideration to the broader 'social organisation' as well as to the more local 'formal organisation'" ( p. 17).

On social media, written emotional expressions are everywhere to be seen (Arcy, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2016; Riordan, 2017), spanning across organizational boundaries. Emotional content is ubiquitous, not least through the use of emojis/emoticons (Derks, Bos, & Von Grumbkow, 2008). These can be found in individual postings, loose networks organized by individuals, as well as in the communication of established "formal" organizations. Previous research has claimed that the emotional architecture of social media is specifically designed to drive traffic on the platform, in turn generating profit for the platform owners (Lee, Hosanagar, & Nair, 2018; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). Social media platforms are thus created for multiple and emotionalized interactions between individuals, and these interactions may also take the shape of organizing efforts. From an organizational perspective, social media interactions may drive emotionally galvanized organizing of individuals (Gerbaudo, 2016), but we know less about the broader implications of social media for established organizations, although research has suggested that they may be grave (cf. Gustafsson & Weinryb, 2019). At the same time, much has been written about negative emotions on social media (Celik, 2019; Näsi, Räsänen, Hawdon, Holkeri, & Oksanen, 2015) but there is a lack of more fine-grained knowledge about the consequences of positive emotional expressions not only for loosely

organized collective action, but also for traditional managerial practices of established organizations. In sum, the prevalence of positive emotional expressions on social media may have broad implications for organizing, both online and offline, and both in loosely organized emotional interactions as well as in established organizational practices. To learn more about this, we need to engage ethnographically with these phenomena, using a variety of methods at hand to capture the elusive. As Rouleau, De Rond, and Musca (2014) write: "new forms of organisational ethnographers have emerged in response to rapidly changing organisational environments as well as technological advances" (p.4). To ethnographically study emotional expressions on social media and their implications for organizing, we thus need to be open to new, and sometimes unexpected, avenues of research.

## *Organizational ethnography, social media and organizing*

With the rise of digital universe, ethnographers from many disciplines have coalesced to interpret and engage with the digital interactions in a broad sense. One of the more influential voices in this vein is Kozinets (2010), who coined the term netnography. Basing his work on marketing research, Kozinets (2002) described a comprehensive and detailed step by step plan for how to study digital communities in an ethnographic manner: "Netnography is based primarily on the observation of textual discourse, an important difference from the balancing of discourse and observed behavior that occurs during in-person ethnography" (p. 64). While laying the ground for an important and interesting research stream, a central challenge in the study of digital organizing persisted: for "how will the ethnographic researcher be able to make adequate sense out of communication that restricts important cues such as nonverbal behaviors?" (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998, p. 176). Although this lack of nonverbal cues to some extent can be redeemed by video-clips, photos and emojis, there are still elements of organizing that contain non-digital elements pertaining to the meaning attributed to digital

behavior, both online and offline. In the words of Spradley (1980) “The ethnographer observes behavior but goes beyond it to inquire about the meaning of that behavior” (p. 70). In order to understand the digital sphere ethnographically, we believe that there is a need to probe into not only emotional expressions that are manifested on social media, but also their meaning.

As organizational ethnographers, our pre-occupation is not only with behavior, but also with the meaning of organizing. Like Spradley (1980) writes: “Any explanation of behavior which excludes what the actors themselves know, how they define their actions, remains a partial explanation that distorts the human situation. The tools of ethnography offer one means to deal with this fact of meaning” (p.16). We here argue that digital interactions, and in our case social media interactions specifically, are not isolated phenomena to be ethnographically read and interpreted in and of themselves in their online manifestation. Rather, we advocate for a hybrid approach, similar to the work of Jordan (2009) on hybrid ethnography and the concept of connective ethnography (cf. Dirksen, Huizing, & Smit, 2010). In this stream of research, an underlying assumption is that those digital interactions that are prevalent in most contemporary forms of organizations and organizing, may have performative effects beyond the digital interaction in and of itself. This implies that the digital infrastructure may influence, and potentially alter, not only what is organized online, but also those other organizational practices and processes that are not in and of themselves always digital. Therefore, our contribution in this chapter differs somewhat from netnography as described by Kozinets (2002, 2010) as we move between the digital aspects of organizing and those taking place in other spheres of the organization.

By considering organizing practices broadly, we here wish to exemplify and provide inspiration on how organizational ethnographers may move beyond any specific methodological approach in their aim to understand social phenomena rather than rigidly pursue any one type of methodology; be that participant observation, shadowing or any other "classical" ethnographic approach. Instead of viewing ethnography as a methodology, we here see it as an epistemological approach to research (Gaggiotti et al., 2017; Yanow, 2012), interacting with and probing the social world to entice a deepened understanding of it. Our view is that "organisational ethnographers are cultural explorers, discovering how organisational actors make sense and get things done and how organisational communities and identities continually emerge over time" (Cunliffe, 2010, p. 229). Therefore, we will here lay out an example of how an ethnographic epistemology may be practiced by contemporary organizational ethnographers, by combining methodological approaches and crossing traditional demarcations to try to grasp elusive yet endemic contemporary organizational phenomena.

## *Reading social media to capture the elusive*

What will we then study more specifically? In order to grasp elusive phenomena standing at the cross-roads of social media, emotions and organizing, we will lean on some established concepts of organization theory – namely collective action and managerial practices. We believe that "theoretical concepts are ingredients that go into the ethnographic mix, alongside and in interaction with observed fieldwork episodes and recorded/remembered utterances and conversations" (Watson, 2012, p. 12). We will not use these concepts in a deductive manner, but rather follow Watson's lead in creating an iterative process, moving between theoretical concepts and organizational ethnographic work. To capture complex empirical phenomena involving language, images, symbols, and emotions, both online and offline, we use a mix of

quantitative and qualitative data, both from social media and outside of social media. The idea behind this mix of methods is related to our aim to read social media ethnographically, trying to capture elusive organizational processes beyond any specific organization's experience (cf. Gaggiotti et al., 2017).

Why will we then study collective action? Previous research has shown that emotional expressions are imperative for collective action by individuals in loosely organized networks, but we know less about the implications for established "formal" organizations (Gerbaudo, 2016; Gustafsson & Weinryb, 2019; Weinryb, Gullberg, & Turunen, 2019). As contemporary society is rife with such "formal" organizations, it is important to look at them in a comparative manner, trying to understand their social media interactions alongside more individual forms of organizing on social media.

And why will we study managerial practices? As has been advocated by Stinchcombe (2005), extreme cases may be of utmost interest in trying to ethnographically understand our social world. In an organizational context, what may be more antithetical to emotionalized organizing than the often rationalized practices of managing, for example, evaluating and rewarding performance or communicating with external stakeholders? Managerial practices have indeed been subject to heavy-handed standardization and rationalization (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Not least, past decades have seemingly cemented the predominate trends of the so called "audit society" (Power, 1997), even further promulgating the global rationalization of management (Drori, Jang, & Meyer, 2006; Jang, 2005; Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997). Given their high degree of rationalization, managerial practices are thus an interesting extreme case to study in the emotionalized context of social media.

### *Organizational ethnography beyond any one specific methodology*

Given our wish to explore how we can read social media ethnographically, we try to unpack the proliferation and meaning of positive emotional expressions in several manners. In order to stay within a specific organizational field, we have here chosen to focus on Swedish civil society organizations and organizing. More specifically, we explore different organizational facets of positive emotional expressions on social media in such organizing, using a variety of methodologies:

1) *collective action* and positive emotional expressions, quantitatively comparing the usage of such expressions in loosely organized networks and established civil society organizations

2) *managerial practices* and positive emotional expressions, trying to qualitatively explore what the proliferation of such expressions actually entails for rationalized organizational practices

The social media accounts we use here are primarily Facebook materials, which were collected and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. In order to enable a quantitative analysis, the posts of 59 Swedish Facebook groups associated with organizing voluntary work during the 2015 European refugee crisis were collected through the Netvizz application (Rieder, 2013). The collection was limited to the three months considered to contain the peak of engagement in Sweden, September-November, 2015, and amounted to 8074 posts. A list of these Facebook groups can be found in Table 1. In order to enable a qualitative analysis, the same posts were manually saved in PDF format, amounting to thousands of pages. We then

chose one particular Facebook group for an in-depth analysis, which will described further down.

In addition to the social media material, as a means to understand meaning, in-depth conversations concerning positive emotional expressions and social media were conducted with four focus groups comprised of 26 managers of established Swedish civil society organizations. The focus groups were conducted at two separate professional training seminars for civil society managers conducted in Stockholm in the fall of 2017 and lasted 1-2 hours each. The participants in the groups were specifically chosen as they had management positions in their established civil society organizations. All quotes used in the paper, also those from Facebook, were translated from Swedish to English by the authors. This translation also protects the anonymity of Facebook participants as their quotes are not immediately traceable online.

To analyze *collective action* and positive emotional expressions we first conducted a qualitative analysis of a limited number of groups to tease out a specific sample of positive emotional expressions employed in the posts. This vocabulary was subsequently tested for and analyzed quantitatively. In a first round of qualitative coding of some of the largest organizational initiatives in our data set, we created a lexicon consisting of eleven words and one emoji that we used to subsequently test for the prevalence of positive emotional expressions in the quantitative data set. The lexicon can be found in Table 2. It should be observed that this is a rather coarse measurement: there are words that could have been included, but have not been; and although the occurrence of words has been checked for context, there is no measurement for whether the post is supposed to be interpreted in an ironic sense, etc. Despite this, we believe that we are able to provide a rough estimate of the

prevalence of posts containing positive emotional expressions, which is useful especially when comparing different types of organizations and networks, as well as when comparing over time. For one example of a Facebook post coded as containing positive emotional expressions, see Figure 1.

To see if positively emotionally charged vocabulary on Facebook would be as prevalent in established organizations as in loosely organized networks, we compared the usage of positive emotional expressions in different forms of organizing. In the very preliminary and descriptive initial quantitative analysis, we have distinguished between two forms of organizing, in order to fully compare established organization with loosely organized networks drawing on the distinction made by Bennett and Segerberg (2013):

- Organizationally brokered networks are networks set up and used by established civil society organizations. Social media is used for mobilizing and management rather than for self-organizing. *In our study, pages and groups administered by established organizations are called simply "organizations" and are considered as such.*
- The loosely organized networks are basically non-organizations formed around the technological platform characterized by a high degree of personalized engagement. *In our study, pages and groups that started out as networks are called simply "networks".*

On social media, positive emotional artifacts, both in the form of emojis and emotional vocabularies abound, and as forms of collective action we can study them quantitively. Yet we also wish to learn about the meaning of these positive emotional markers, seeming to signify an emotionalized behavior. Costello, McDermott, and Wallace (2017) describe how it is possible, and perhaps desirable, to look at the online interactions in combination with other

methods, to understand the broader context of these interactions. Although we may see these emotional artifacts and the way they are used on social media, we still are at loss on how to interpret what this behavior means. In order to ethnographically read social media, we thus need to do what ethnographers have always done - in different periods and settings – we also need to talk to people engaged in this behavior. We need to hear their stories in order to interpret what is actually going on, but we also need to observe their behavior.

To learn more about *managerial practices* in relation to positive emotional expressions, we analyzed one particular Facebook group from our 2015 sample as well as the focus group interviews. The Facebook group was a Swedish loosely organized network initiative that emerged in the fall of 2015 to help refugees on the island of Lesbos. The group was characterized by a large number of members and intense interaction among these, and the posts of the group amounted to 350 pages in total. Here, we specifically coded for behavior on social media, with a particular focus on how the use of money was communicated and accounted for in both emotional and more rationalized ways. The focus group interviews were firstly coded to identify managerial practices, such as communicating with subordinates and evaluating performance. In the second round of coding, we probed deeper into the potential effects of positive emotional expressions specifically on managerial practices. In this second round of coding, four major themes arose, and we will center our presentation of the qualitative data around these themes.

## *Exploring collective action and positive emotional expressions*

As stated above, 8074 Facebook posts have been analyzed from 59 groups and pages, all considered to be instrumental in organizing and mobilizing voluntary work in relation to the refugee crisis in 2015 (Table 1). 48 were Facebook pages and 11 were groups. At the time of

the time of data collection (December, 2015), they ranged in number of members/followers from about 200 to 277 000 (UNICEF Sweden). 45 of the groups/networks were coded as organizations and 15 as networks. The organizations had on average higher membership/follower numbers (57 000 on average) compared to the networks (5000 on average). It could be expected that the networks would be more active on Facebook, considering that they relied on communication and organization via social media to a much higher extent than established organizations with a permanent membership base. This expectation was confirmed in the analysis: despite their lower number and having substantially lower membership/followership rates, the networks in the sample posted 4103 times in comparison to 3971 posts from the organizations. That the organizations generally have higher membership/follower numbers means that their posts are visible to more people. For this reason, posts from organizations generally have higher engagement rates (208 on average) than posts from networks (53 on average). Engagement is measured as the total number of shares, likes and comments per post. There is unsurprisingly a statistically significant correlation (0.3, significant at the 1% level) between engagement rate for a post and the number of members/followers of the respective group or page. It should however also be remembered that most posts only get very little engagement, with a small number of posts attaining very large engagement rates. This tendency towards power law distributions is well known within studies of internet phenomena and widely attested in the literature (Hindman 2008). The number of followers/members is however not the only thing that affects engagement rate, to which we will return shortly.

The intensity of posting varies to an extreme extent during the period under study (see Figure 2). There is a peak in posting early in September 2015, coinciding with the publication of the image of the drowned refugee boy Alan Kurdi on the shores of Turkey, as well as a well-

publicized speech by Swedish prime minister Stefan Löfven at a rally in support of refugees in which he famously stated that “My Europe does not build any walls”. The intensity then drops sharply at the end of September and stabilizes at a lower level for the rest of the period. The different ways that organizations and networks use Facebook posts is very visible when comparing activity over the period. Whereas posting explodes among the networks during early September and then rapidly collapses, the rate of posting for the organizations is much more stable all throughout the period although we also here see the uptick in activity in September. From October onwards, the organizations produce more posts per day than the networks. This reflects the boom-and-bust quality that many spontaneous networked movements show, where large numbers of people can be mobilized in a very short period of time, but where the mobilization can be fragile. In contrast, established civil society organizations can benefit from concentrated moments of mobilization, but can to a larger extent rely on a permanent membership base, a steady flow of donations, a structure that includes a clear hierarchy and more channels for internal communication, etc.

As our specific point of interest here is the use of positive emotional expressions in posts, we will now turn to this topic. Out of the 8074 posts, 14.1% contain positive emotional expressions. The share of positive emotional expressions posts is roughly equal across five different types of posts: text-only status updates, photos, videos, links and events with posts including photos have the largest share of positive emotional expressions posts at 18.7%. There are large differences between individual pages and groups: whereas the Facebook page of the Swedish Red Cross Youth in Gothenburg (categorized as organization) has 41.2% positive emotional expressions posts (maximum), the Facebook page of Ingen Människa Är Illegal (No Person Is Illegal) Gothenburg (categorized as network) has 0 positive emotional expressions posts (minimum) out of a total of 50 during the period. Comparing organizations

and networks, we would expect networks on average to have a higher share of positive emotional expressions posts due to the greater need for networks to use positive emotional expressions in order to engage and mobilize in lieu of a permanent member base. However, it is actually the other way round: 16.3% positive emotional expressions posts for the organizations compared to 12.6% positive emotional expressions posts for the networks.

In our analysis we see that organizations are even more active in using positive emotional expressions in their posts than networks. Is this pattern also stable during the studied time period? Yes (Figure 3)! Looking at the number of positive emotional expressions posts, networks post a large number of positive emotional expressions posts in September, following the general trend in number of posts, whereas organizations have a steadier trend with a smaller uptick in September. From October, organizations post more positive emotional expressions posts than the networks. The analysis however reveals that the *share* of positive emotional expressions posts increases for networks but not clearly so for organizations (Figure 4). This probably reflects the fact that the number of practically oriented posts containing brisk practically-oriented information goes down, while general pleads for solidarity gradually take up a larger part of the total number of posts.

There also seem to be instrumental reasons for using positive emotional expressions language in posts: it increases the engagement rates. Positive emotional expressions posts get an average engagement rate of 300 compared to 100 for non-positive emotional expressions posts. Positive emotional expressions substantially increase the engagement rate both for posts from organizations and networks.

From this brief analysis of the Facebook posts, we can see that established civil society organizations depend on the use of positive emotional expressions for creating engagement to the same degree as loosely organized networks. This is interesting if we consider that intuitively one may think that networks would be more prone to engage a loose group of followers through emotions compared to organizations, who have a more stable based of members. But does the use of positive emotional expressions for collective action on social media have any consequences for rationalized managerial practices in established civil society organizations? To answer this question, we now turn to the other parts of our data; the qualitative Facebook data and the focus groups.

## *Exploring the organizational implications of positive emotional expressions on social media for managerial practices*

### Positive emotional expressions as a complementary management language

In all the focus groups, positive emotional expressions appear to be considered an important complement to other usage of language. It was not a separate discourse per se, but rather an altered use of specific words in extant discourses. One reason that is put forth in the focus groups is that positive emotional expressions, including emojis, is a means of nuancing written messages, which can easily be misinterpreted in the absence of body language and tone of voice. Another reason has more to do with outreach and relevance.

Some of the organizations have consulted specialists, with regards to how to communicate, and the staff has undergone training. This indicates a professionalization in the usage of positive emotional expressions, and in the training courses the managers have learnt that they should “use hearts and emotions in order to break through”. One organization has engaged a

professional so-called influencer to increase the positive emotional commitment around their cause.

Several of the participants of the focus groups tell about a shift in the emotional expressions used in various communication channels. One concerns the emphasis, which some suggest has shifted from more negative to more positive. One manager refers to “the almighty pep” in the organization, implying that more or less everything, even the duller tasks, are framed in positive terms. Negative messages are according to the same manager not communicated in emotional terms to the same extent, but rather as debate articles. They also try not to spark engagement among their members by using a negative tone.

Another change in emphasis concerns the meaning of positive emotional expressions, which many suggest is becoming inflated. Another manager refers to a sense of being “micro boosted”, implying a very frequent exposure to positive emotional expressions from coworkers when simply performing her small daily tasks. Just like positive emotional expressions and emojis in general, constitute a means to try to more precisely convey a written message, the intensified positivity seems to serve to adjust for misunderstandings. The use of positive words and superlatives appears to nurture a continued, self-reinforcing, need to use them, and preferably to use them even more all the time. Even people who do not like using emojis have to do so it in order to keep workers in a good mood and avoid being perceived as angry. An “OK” is no longer sufficient but needs to be complemented by a range of positive words and emojis.

The use of positive emotional expressions is also seen in our qualitative analysis of Facebook data. As illustrated in the previous section, both Facebook page administrators and

stakeholders use such vocabulary. Even though there is certainly also criticism from the members/activists' side, many of the posts by the Facebook page administrators are followed by highly enthusiastic comments from stakeholders. "You do such a fantastically important work!"; "Magic!! You are so good!!"; "Thanks for everything that you do!".

The highly positive emotional expressions is thus also present in the qualitative Facebook data. Some of the participants in the focus groups describe how the above-mentioned changes in vocabulary have transferred into their organizations.

> It is supposed to be fun and rewarding all the time, and in this quest for positive messages when we talk to each other… yes, we do it a lot when you work in different types of conventions and events and I believe that it derives from how we communicate on social media.

Others have not noticed such an effect.

> I represent an employer organization and our members are companies and organizations, so we are not… I do not recognize this at all. We are very… we try to use spoken language but not with hearts and emojis, but we are more boring and correct.

As the last quote suggests, these differences may have to do with rather varying demands of the different stakeholders. This will be elaborated in the next section.

**Tailoring positive emotional expressions to in different audiences - a professional managerial competence**

The use of positive emotional expressions appears to be adjusted when accounting to different stakeholders, both inside and outside of the organization. As indicated above, there are differences in how civil society organizations communicate with members depending on whether the members are organizations or individuals. A contrasting example to the one above is provided by the manager of an organization with individual members.

> I feel that we consciously have shifted to conveying an unserious image and an unserious language, it has always been very important for us to do, for I at least have always believed that young people do not engage in X [name of organization] because they love statutes and protocols and love sitting in meetings, but because they love X. It is the first step towards engagement.

Similar thoughts are presented by another manager, who highlights the importance of emotional vocabulary in creating a culture that appeals to young people.

> Today young people often want to more clearly identify with the organization they engage in. This, this is my identity, this is part of my brand, if you will. Then I think that such words are really important, trying to create a certain culture, a certain ambiance and a certain pep as you have talked about. It is also about values but I think that emotional words play a role there.

The use of positive emotional expressions is thus perceived as a source of fun and engagement and to some extent as a contrast to being serious and correct. For some of the managers, adapting to a more emotional vocabulary is a challenge. It is perceived as a distinct skill, something that needs to be acquired. This could be interpreted as an altered form of

emotional competence. In addition to learning to communicate in this language, it also comes with having to handle so called trolls who can easily spread negative emotions in an organization's social media presence. And the other way around, as people advance in a civil society organization, they need to adjust from a frequent usage of positive emotional expressions to a more neutral language that is deemed suitable for communicating with politicians and other organizations. Here, the use of positive emotional expressions seems to have created a competence problem; while lowering the threshold for volunteer engagement, those engaged by the positive emotional words are less prepared than other volunteers for more administrative tasks further up in the organizations.

> At last you reach a point for your engagement in the organization where a certain competence is needed. If you are part of the association you have to acquire a basic understanding of how government grants work, and that means reading our regulations and appropriation. … And suddenly the emotions become rather irrelevant in that context. It is not sufficient to say that we think that the distribution key for government grants sucks, it is not a sufficiently nuanced description of how we view the problem.

This last quote indicates that although rationalized managerial practices may have been altered inside civil society organizations and in relation to potential donors and members, this is not as much the case in relation to public administration.

### Managers' emotional challenges and opportunities with the prevalence of positive emotional expressions: stress, injustice and wellbeing

Among managers, the frequent use of positive emotional expressions seems to cause both emotional challenges, in the form of stress and perceived injustices, and but also opportunities

for emotional wellbeing managers. We will start with the challenges and then move to the opportunities.

The first challenges we identify is an inflation in terms of how management work is valued. This concerns pressure to perform in accordance with the grandiosity signaled by the frequent use of positive emotional expressions. Some feel stressed when they do not receive overwhelming response for their management performance. One manager also believes that it may scare people off.

> We use these words for rather small achievements if you look at the bigger picture, but the way we highlight it, it sounds as if you have discovered Atlantis, and that's the thing, they are amazing who do this voluntarily, but for others it may be… dissuasive. That you do not have the energy to find Atlantis, sort of.

Another challenge is a concern about what type of activity may be acknowledged as a valid and appreciated task for managers to perform. In the focus groups, concern is voiced over the gap between visible forms of performance that are lauded on social media in positive emotional words, and the "invisible" day to day work that some tasks require and that may be completely inappropriate to display in social media but that nevertheless entail a lot of complicated management work, e.g., handling a sensitive staff issue. This may result in a disproportional appreciation of some colleagues and members, at the expense of others. It may potentially also encourage managers to focus more on tasks that can be accounted for in a way that may render them positive feedback on social media. Even though the urge for popularity is a perennial management problem, it seems like the instant visibility rendered to them on social media may amplify challenges related to inconvenient work.

Yet another challenge concerns the competence and structures needed to govern the use of positive emotional expressions. As described earlier, not everyone is familiar or comfortable with positive emotional expressions, both on and off social media, which causes stress among managers. There is also an awareness of the uncontrollable element of social media, how rapidly something can spread compared to when published on paper. This calls for more guidelines, e.g., with regards to how to handle trolls, but how to manage employees and make them use positive emotional expressions in appropriate ways. Members and other activists who are not informed about the managerial practices of positive emotional expressions, or where such guidelines do not exist, may sometimes engage in social media conversations without being aware of the professional practices of the organization, which may cause stress for all involved. One manager even argues that some organizations may even be afraid to use positive emotional expressions in ways that would potentially be appropriate, as a result of the enormous outreach of social media. As an example of this, one respondent recounts the story of a viral spread of a positively charge humorous message posted by a junior employee at a very large faith-based organization, that incurred severe reputational costs and additional face-saving work for top management.

Under the influence of social media it is also suggested that the increase in positive emotional expressions has provided opportunities by creating more space for speaking about emotions also when meeting in real life in the organization. One manager describes how organizational meetings often begin by letting everyone around the table account for how they feel at the moment, which in turn may provide some explanation for, e.g., an individual's ability to take on additional tasks. There is also an increased mix of personal and professional emotional interaction online, where colleagues give each other positive emotional feedback on personal social media accounts. This may create both a greater sense of community among coworkers,

but also cause discomfort as interactions sometimes are perceived as too private. Some managers speak specifically about keeping their public and private roles apart on social media, while others recount how they merge the two spheres.

## *Discussion*

Following the idea of the value of studying extreme cases, combined with the indication of the relevance of emotional expressions for collective action, we here have tried to understand if even rationalized managerial practices are subjected to the proliferation of positive emotional expressions, and what this may mean for these practices.

By mixing qualitative and quantitative methods, we have here presented an example of how elusive empirical phenomena may be approached by organizational ethnographers. Our broad and unorthodox analysis points to an inflation in the usage of positive emotional expressions in civil society organizations, indicating an emerging institutionalization process of positive emotions as an important means to organize the field of Swedish civil society. This process entails the replacement of previous forms of engagement based on shared negative experiences or contentious politics by strong positive emotional content. Focusing on the transformational aspect, we see indications of a discursive positive emotional standardization (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000; Lindebaum, 2012), which in essence threatens established rationalized ways of organizing, not only in loosely organized networks coalesced through social media, but also in established civil society organizations predating the advent of social media, often by many decades, in their managerial practices. This points to the increasing importance of emotional language competence in terms of the usage of positive emotional expressions to manage stakeholders, both inside and outside of the organization, and both on social media and in other contexts.

More specifically, by combining our reading of behavior on social media and its broader meaning, we can see indications of an alteration of what emotional competence entails across the civil society sector, where managers from different types of fields and catering to diverse populations describe an increase in positive emotional expressions in their organizations. We also see that this puts new demands on the proficiency of managers and their coworkers in how to use the altered meaning of positive emotional expressions when managing their organizations and accounting for their activities. Managers need to learn and incorporate positive emotional expressions into their work, but there are also challenges involved in inhabiting this institutional ethos comfortably (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Voronov & Weber, 2016). There are always many areas of management that cannot be boosted and shared with others, and managers thus need to distance themselves from fully implementing positive emotional expressions into all of their daily work. Along the same lines, managers need to adjust their emotional expressions according to the audience; rationalized standardized accounts are still of relevance in communication with for example public administration, but less so with other stakeholders. There thus seems to be increased demands on managers to incorporate positive emotional expressions into their practices, and at the same time to compartmentalize their use of this newly acquired emotional competence. This entails a selective demonstration of emotional competence acquiescence, actually putting more complex demands on the emotional competence proficiency of these managers to both incorporate and avoid the increased prevalence of positive emotional expressions in their work. In this way the prevalence of positive emotional expressions becomes an additional layer of structuration (Barley & Tolbert, 1997) in managerial practices across established civil society organizations, indicating an alteration of institutionalized rationalized practices,

meaning that positive emotional expressions changes the way managers organize and account for their work.

## *Conclusion*

Modern organizing is fragmented and spans over multiple, often simultaneous contexts, implying that "Traditional techniques need to be updated if they are to be of use in the study of contemporary fields of practice" (Czarniawska, 2014, p. 9). We have here presented an ethnographic mixed-methods case study on the proliferation and meaning of positive emotional expressions in organizing, exploring it as induced by social media, but not necessarily only taking place in the digital realm. By doing this, we hope to encourage others to move beyond perceived methodological and organizational boundaries when necessary, in service of the broader aim of a nuanced, comprehensive and complex understanding of the organizing of our social, and partially digital, world.

In his seminal text on ethnography and participant observation, Spradley (1980) emphasized the importance of any ethnographic reading to probe not only into behavior, but also into meaning. He writes: "The essential core of ethnography is this concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand" (p. 5). We have here tried to read social media and its implications for organizing in an hybrid-ethnographic manner, by using a mixed-methods approach to explore the proliferation and meaning of positive emotional expressions on social media ethnographically. As Yanow (2012) points out, the importance of "situated meaning front and center: ethnography of whatever stripe is concerned with sense-making, that of situated actors" when conducting organizational ethnography (p.33). We hope that our effort to try to capture an elusive and prevalent phenomenon which extends beyond

any specific organizational experience may inspire others to engage a variety of methodological approaches to unpack complex multi-modal digital phenomena.

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# Tables

*Table 1. Share of positive emotional expressions in groups and pages.*

| Organizational type | Comparative classification | Posts September-November 2015 | Share of enthusiastic posts, % | Members 9 December 2015 | Group/page |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Network | Refugee focused network | 32 | 31,30% | 2002 | group |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 31 | 22,60% | 10860 | group |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 648 | 21,00% | 3094 | group |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 437 | 17,20% | 18186 | page |
| Network | Refugee focused organization | 144 | 16,70% | 2716 | page |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 112 | 11,60% | 5107 | page |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 877 | 10,80% | 9983 | group |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 289 | 9,70% | 1911 | group |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 301 | 7,00% | 5171 | group |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 44 | 6,80% | 1453 | page |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 167 | 6,60% | 5623 | page |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 527 | 6,60% | 2759 | group |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 423 | 5,70% | 3108 | group |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 50 | 0,00% | 2298 | group |
| Network | Refugee focused network | 21 | 0,00% | 5122 | group |
| Organization | Temperance movement organization | 109 | 19,30% | 589 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 64 | 15,60% | 1083 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 72 | 15,30% | 940 | page |
| Organization | Left wing organization | 463 | 13,60% | 15848 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 125 | 8,80% | 1392 | page |
| Organization | International organization | 24 | 33,30% | 3328 | page |
| Organization | International organization | 17 | 29,40% | 693 | page |
| Organization | Aid agency | 14 | 28,60% | 481 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 95 | 26,30% | 8913 | page |
| Organization | Aid agency | 4 | 25,00% | 285 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 50 | 22,00% | 1716 | page |
| Organization | Aid agency | 146 | 21,90% | 276577 | page |
| Organization | Aid agency | 88 | 21,60% | 38760 | page |
| Organization | Left wing organization | 182 | 21,10% | 5384 | page |
| Organization | Aid agency | 21 | 19,00% | 846 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 69 | 18,80% | 7365 | page |
| Organization | Aid agency | 247 | 17,80% | 39130 | page |
| Organization | Temperance movement organization | 42 | 16,70% | 1118 | page |
| Organization | Aid agency | 192 | 16,70% | 116768 | page |
| Organization | Left wing organization | 57 | 15,80% | 2291 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 137 | 15,30% | 930 | page |
| Organization | Adult educational association | 60 | 15,00% | 8324 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 29 | 13,80% | 219 | page |
| Organization | Left wing organization | 169 | 13,00% | 17 939 | group |
| Organization | Refugee focused organization | 65 | 10,80% | 4693 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 77 | 10,40% | 8235 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 108 | 10,20% | 3436 | page |
| Organization | Refugee focused organization | 30 | 10,00% | 2178 | page |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Organization | Religious organization | 20 | 10,00% | 472 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 76 | 9,20% | 3910 | page |
| Organization | Left wing organization | 56 | 8,90% | 6138 | page |
| Organization | Aid agency | 91 | 8,80% | 1002 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 84 | 8,30% | 15651 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 104 | 7,70% | 2417 | page |
| Organization | Left wing organization | 119 | 7,60% | 4612 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 28 | 7,10% | 2858 | page |
| Organization | Refugee focused organization | 106 | 6,60% | 3161 | page |
| Organization | Temperance movement organization | 91 | 6,60% | 6508 | page |
| Organization | Aid agency | 64 | 6,60% | 120470 | page |
| Organization | Refugee focused network | 111 | 6,30% | 9580 | page |
| Organization | Aid agency | 85 | 4,70% | 78 175 | page |
| Organization | Aid agency | 59 | 3,40% | 3884 | page |
| Organization | Left wing organization | 49 | 2,00% | 2387 | page |
| Organization | Religious organization | 72 | 1,40% | 6035 | page |
| | | **8074** | **12,60%** | | |
| | | | | | |

*Table 2 . Words coded as positive emotional expressions.*

| **Word stems in Swedish** | **English translation** |
|---|---|
| fantastisk | fantastic |
| 💔 | heart emoji |
| glädje | joy |
| hjälte | hero |
| hjärta | heart |
| kämpa | to champion |
| kärlek | love |
| stolt | proud |
| underbar | wonderful |
| vänner | friends |
| älska | love |

## Figures

*Figure 1: Example of positive emotional expressions-coded post..*


*Translation of text: "#uddevalla Many thanks to LSK and the people in Uddevalla! We got half a truck with warm clothes, jackets, shoes and blankets in the end. A wonderful initiative by Erika who got help from fantastic volunteers! Also thanks to our fantastic drivers who not only secured a truck, but drove it all to Uddevalla after the game! How wonderful to see how all of Sweden is on the move! #LSK #payitforward #loveyourneighbour" Note: LSK, Ljungskile Sport Club, is a football team from a small town close to the city of Uddevalla, located in western Sweden.*

*Figure 2. Facebook posts per day and organizational type, September-November 2015.*

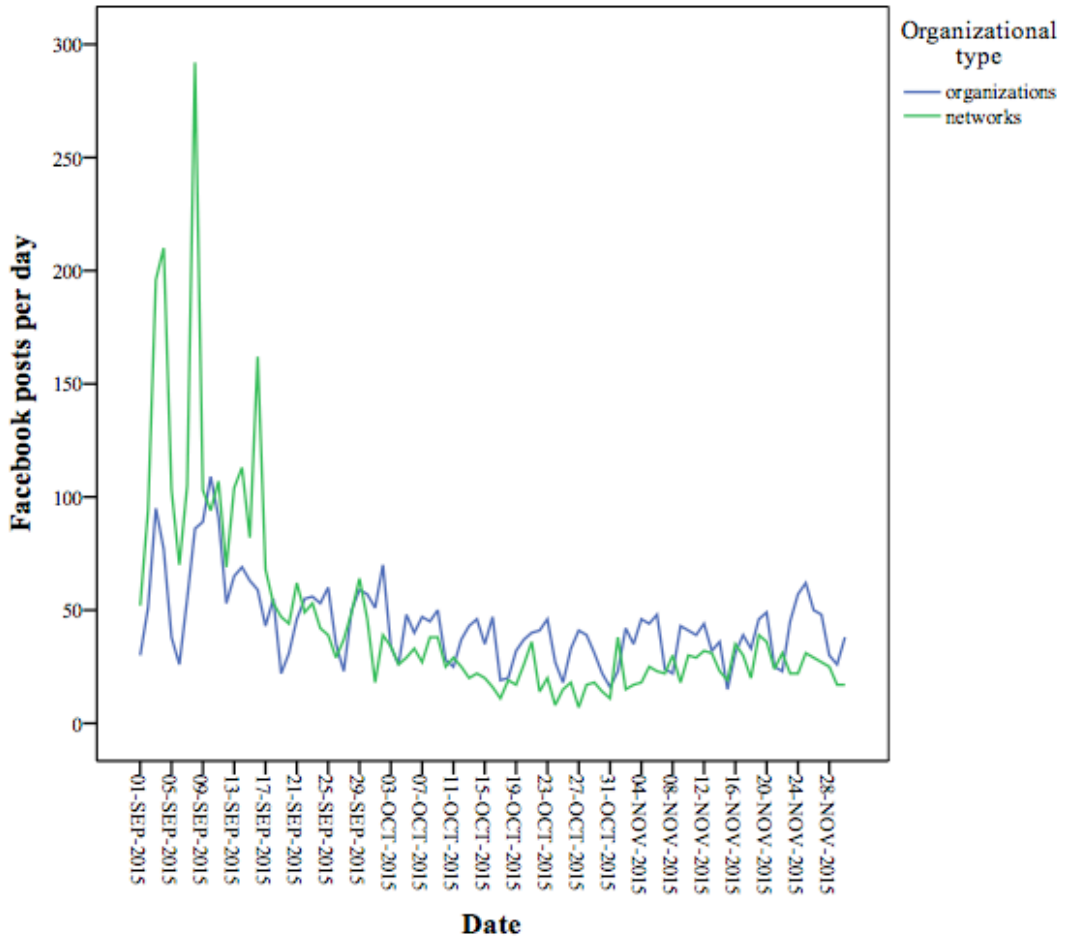
Organizational type
organizations
networks
Facebook posts per day
300
250
200
150
100
50
0
01-SEP-2015
05-SEP-2015
09-SEP-2015
13-SEP-2015
17-SEP-2015
21-SEP-2015
25-SEP-2015
29-SEP-2015
03-OCT-2015
07-OCT-2015
11-OCT-2015
15-OCT-2015
19-OCT-2015
23-OCT-2015
27-OCT-2015
31-OCT-2015
04-NOV-2015
08-NOV-2015
12-NOV-2015
16-NOV-2015
20-NOV-2015
24-NOV-2015
28-NOV-2015
Date

*Figure 3. Number of positive emotional expressions posts per day and organizational type, September-November 2015.*

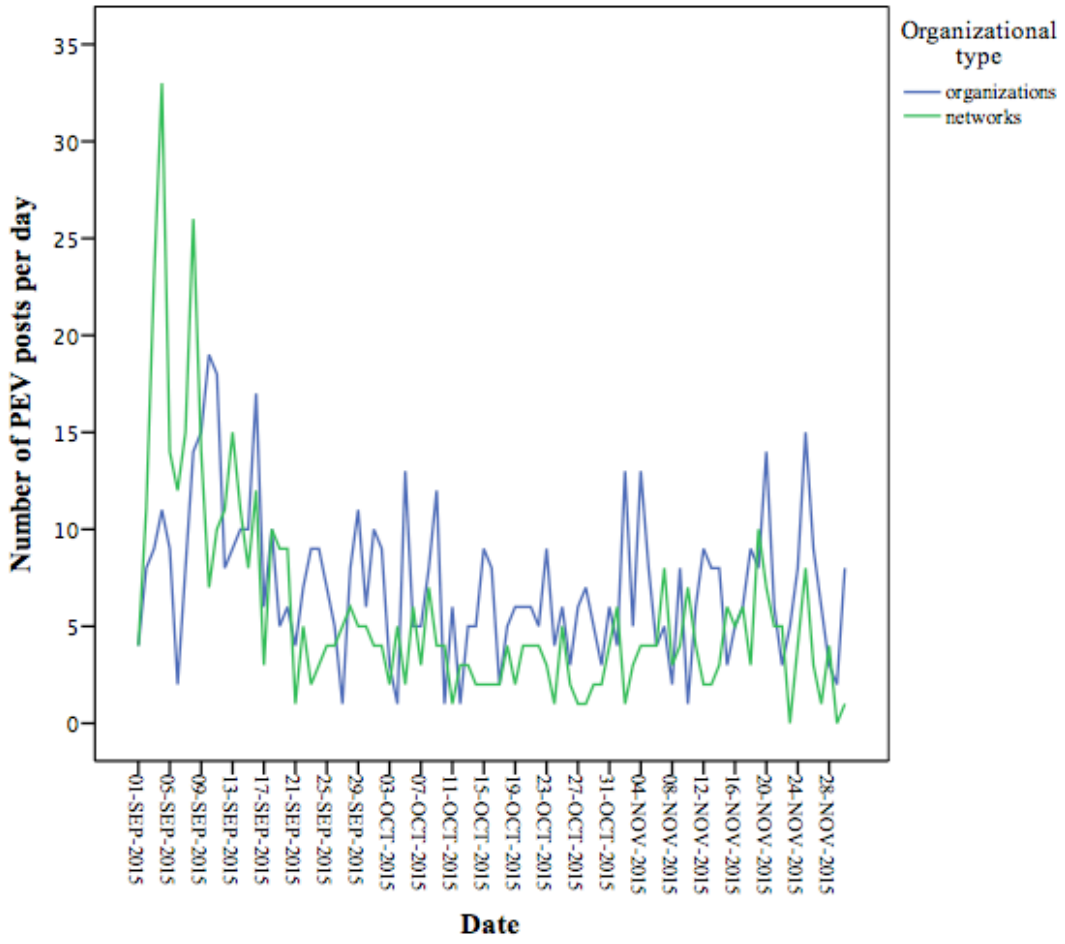

*Figure 4. Share of positive emotional expressions posts per day and organizational type, September-November 2015.*