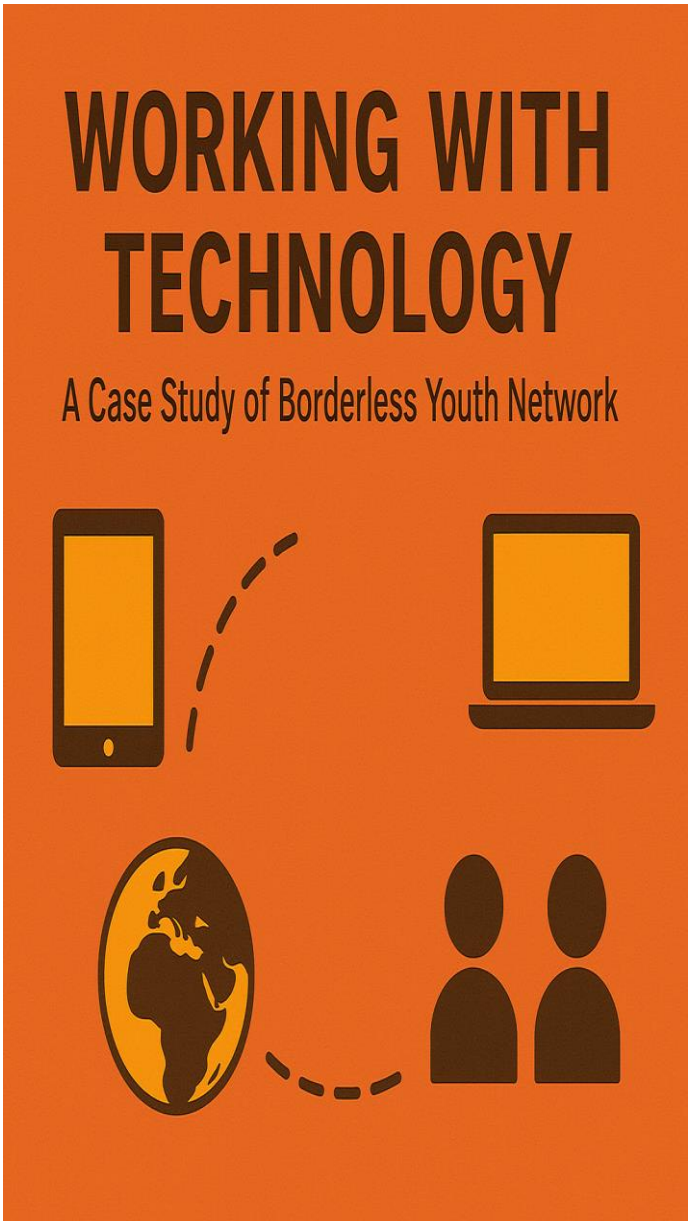

Abstract

This thesis explores how small and medium-sized NGOs use digital tools in their daily work, based on a case study of Borderless Youth Network (BYN), a Danish NGO that helps young people become global and active citizens. Through three months of participant observation and interviews with 12 staff members, it investigates how digital tools shape organizational practices, knowledge sharing, and outreach. Using four theoretical frameworks, the analysis shows that digital transformation in small NGOs is an ongoing negotiation between technology, organizational needs, and everyday social practices. Key findings show that valuable knowledge often exists in relationships rather than in digital systems; that digital platforms support cross-cultural collaboration across language and distance; and that limited resources lead to both innovation and internal digital inequality. This thesis contributes to understanding digital practices in resource-constrained organizations and offers practical insights for similar NGOs navigating digital change.

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Introduction

This thesis explores how small and medium-sized NGOs adopt and adapt digital technologies in their daily work, focusing on the case of Borderless Youth Network (BYN), a youth-focused NGO in Denmark. With this thesis, I aim to examine how digital tools shape organizational practices, knowledge sharing, and outreach efforts in an organization dedicated to empowering young people to become active global citizens.

My interest in studying NGOs and their use of technology stems from a personal desire to contribute to a more inclusive Danish society. At a time when racism and xenophobia remain pressing societal issues (The Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2024), I believe that digital technologies can help foster awareness and intercultural understanding, particularly among young people, who are highly active on digital platforms (Statistics Denmark, 2020). This interest is also shaped by my own experience with digital media. For example, I once published a reader's letter in a Danish newspaper, addressing the racial tone often seen on platforms like Facebook, which is underscored through recent research by Ørtoft et al. (2025). Engaging with these platforms, both personally and academically, has shaped my motivation to explore how NGOs use technology to connect people and build more inclusive communities.

This motivation led me to explore fieldwork opportunities in a range of Danish organizations, including other NGOs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and local integration initiatives. Before the summer of 2023, I contacted BYN and several other organizations, explaining that I was looking for a place to conduct fieldwork for my master's thesis between August and November. After a brief phone call from the leader of BYN, Alex, he replied, writing, *"I would like to welcome you to spend your internship at Borderless Youth Network from 1 August to 30 November 2023"* (Alex, 2023). Although I had described the project as fieldwork in my initial email, he continued to refer to it as an internship. This early confusion pointed to a broader uncertainty about how roles are defined within the NGO, which may also be confusing for others who join, such as interns or other researchers.

Alex is the founder and director of BYN. Originally from Mauritania, he grew up herding cattle and attended a local school with strict rules, where students were punished for speaking their native languages instead of French. These early experiences influenced his strong belief that education should empower people and help them express themselves freely. Motivated partly by this, he established BYN as a place for young people from different backgrounds to openly share their cultures and experiences, focusing particularly on education, intercultural dialogue, and youth empowerment.

When Alex replied to my first E-mail, I instantly chose BYN for my fieldwork because of its explicit focus on cross-cultural dialogue and its reputation for innovative approaches to youth engagement, which aligns with my own interests. I was initially interested in how an NGO could help combat racism in Denmark, but as my fieldwork developed, I sought more to understand how an organization that promotes cross-cultural dialogue manages both its internal ways of working and its external outreach - for example, how staff move between digital platforms and more offline methods such as face-to-face meetings, printed materials, and public events. Furthermore, the work of BYN highlights the need for greater intercultural awareness and education among young people. BYN aims to do this by using both digital means to reach young people, especially with messages that can help combat prejudice and promote global citizenship. However, this could apply to other age groups as well. Although the NGO mainly focuses on young people, they also target individuals who are a bit older, as I saw a range of different people and ages when I attended a couple of events held in the building, where BYN has their office (Field Notes, September 18, 2023).
While small and medium-sized NGOs form a major part of civil society, they are still underrepresented in studies, which supports the relevance of this thesis (Godefroid et al., 2023).

At BYN, digital technologies created opportunities but also brought challenges in relation to their work. In my field notes, I noted how staff members used various digital tools, some that apparently made their workflow more efficient. For example, this happened by sharing documents they wanted criticism on in the shared Microsoft Teams folder instead of sending the specific document to each office member, which would have slowed down the process significantly. (Field Notes, October 4, 2023.

Although this thesis focuses on a single NGO through a case study, it aims to identify patterns that may apply to other small and medium-sized NGOs facing similar challenges such as limited resources or staff changes (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Lastly, I aim to investigate how knowledge is shared, outreach is conducted, and digital tools are integrated into everyday work.

Research Question

Based on these challenges observed at BYN consisting of limited resources, continuity problems, and using various digital tools, my central research question is:

How are small and medium-sized NGOs working with digital tools, and what functions and impacts are these technologies having on their work?

While the research question addresses small and medium-sized NGOs broadly, I use a case study of BYN to explore these wider dynamics. The findings are context-specific but may still offer analytical insights relevant

to similar organizations. The goal is not to assess whether digital platforms are effective or improve work practices, but to understand how they are used, experienced, and interpreted in everyday life at organizations like BYN (Orlikowski, 2000).

BYN is a relevant case study for several reasons; it provides the opportunity to explore how individual practices, organizational structures, and digital technologies interact in a specific setting (Yin, 2018). While this case-study only focuses on a single organization, the approach supports analytical generalization rather than statistical. In other words, this means that the findings do not necessarily apply to a similar NGO, where the context might differ due to other laws, cultures or how the NGOs receive funding. Nevertheless, it can offer conceptual insights that may be relevant in similar organizational contexts.

As mentioned earlier, BYN focus on the younger individuals further emphasizes the need for effective digital communication. This is where Instagram comes in handy, as it allows BYN to use a free platform, where they for example have the chance to draw attention from Danish students who then may nudge their teacher to reach out to BYN for a workshop. The fact that BYN works with limited funding often calls for creative and flexible approaches to adopting and using technology, which will be explored further in the analysis.

Approach and Thesis Structure

Initially, I aimed to take an ethnographic approach, focusing on being the "fly on the wall" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) - although this is not fully achievable. However, as the leader stressed the word "internship," I ended up combining elements of a traditional internship with participant observation. During the three months at BYN, I spent almost every day at BYN's office along with their office team, except for one day each week when I worked from home to focus on writing. This gave me a dual role that naturally caused some issues regarding my position as a researcher and worried me at first regarding bias, but it also allowed access to a deeper investigation of the organizational life within BYN (Emerson et al., 2011).

During these three months, I was part of the NGO's daily life. This meant that I was attending meetings, assisting with projects, daily practical tasks such as making coffee and in general observing interactions in both physical and digital spaces. In addition to this, participant observation was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with office members across different roles, from the founder and leader, Alex, to short-term interns. By combining these methods, I sought to understand not just what digital tools were officially adopted, but how they were used, experienced, and interpreted in everyday practice.

In the chapters that follow, I first present a problem analysis that contextualizes BYN within the broader NGO landscape and examines the specific organizational challenges that shape its digital practices. The literature review then situates this research within existing scholarship on NGOs, digital technologies, and knowledge

management. After outlining my methodological approach, I will introduce the theoretical framework guiding my analysis. The subsequent analysis chapters examine three key dimensions of digital technology use at BYN: knowledge management and organizational learning; digital tools for global youth engagement; and the tensions between technological adoption and resource constraints. I conclude with reflections on the implications for similar organizations navigating digital transformation with limited resources.

Having established the research question and approach, the following Problem Analysis delves deeper into BYN's organizational context and the specific challenges it faces as a small NGO navigating digital transformation.

With this thesis, I hope to give a more detailed picture of how small and medium-sized NGOs go through digital transformation - not as a straightforward process with clear outcomes, but as something shaped by ongoing negotiation between technology, organizational needs, and everyday human experiences.

Problem Analysis

Organizational Background and History of BYN

BYN is one of the NGOs working to empower youth across geographical boundaries through education, dialogue, and collaboration. What started as a project to support dialogue in the Middle East in 1999 between Israelis and Palestinians was formally registered as an NGO in 2004, gaining official partnership status with UNESCO that same year. Founded in Denmark but with a global outlook, BYN operates with a clear mission: to empower, connect and educate young people to engage with important issues like sustainability and social justice.

BYN's founder, a passionate educator with roots in West Africa, established the organization with a vision to create spaces where young people from different backgrounds could connect and develop as global citizens. Initially operating from a small office in the suburbs of Copenhagen, BYN moved to its current location in central Copenhagen in 2017, where it shares a building with several other civil society organizations. This physical arrangement reflects the collaborative spirit of the organization - as I observed in my field notes, *"BYN shares an office with a human rights NGO focusing on architecture and another one focusing on art and intercultural relationships"* (Field notes, September 2, 2023).

Through projects ranging from workshops on digital behavior to support programs for refugees, the organization creates spaces where youth from diverse backgrounds can connect, learn, and develop their potential as what the NGO calls "change-makers". The leader, Alex, stressed a reason for their school-focused initiatives: *"We need that in Denmark, you know, because the schools are very conservative"* (Alex, 2023).

His comment refers to the fact that many Danish schools do not place strong emphasis on topics like racism, sustainability, online behavior, or how to identify misinformation. This observation is supported by research from the European Digital Media Observatory (2023), which found that *"there are no explicit policies on digital literacy in the educational curriculum"* in Denmark, with the focus being primarily on technical digital skills rather than critical evaluation of content.

John, the Social Media Manager at BYN who holds a master's degree in Global Studies, provided more insight into why the organization focuses on young people:

> *"I think the mission is to make the world a better place, but also, they have a big focus on young people. And I agree because young people are the future. So, in order to make a better future for the world. We have to empower young people. And that is something we do all the time in all of our projects"* (John, 2023).

The people I met at the NGO consistently referred to these empowered youth as "change-makers" - individuals who should actively transform their communities and societies in the future. This aligns with how the leader of BYN put it during a staff meeting, saying they are *"the change of tomorrow"* (Alex, 2023).

The Danish NGO Landscape and BYN's Position

The Danish NGO landscape provides a distinctive context for understanding BYN's operations. Unlike countries where the non-profit sector is primarily characterized by service provision or advocacy work, Danish NGOs often operate within a strong tradition of civic participation and lifelong learning - what Danes call "foreningskultur" (association culture) (Henriksen & Bundesen, 2004). This creates an environment where organizations like BYN benefit from relatively high levels of social trust and democratic engagement, while still facing challenges related to sustainable funding and organizational stability (Henriksen et al., 2019).

BYN's financial structure relies on multiple sources: project grants from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Danish Youth Council, participation in EU-funded programs like Erasmus+, international partnership projects, membership fees, and educational activities. This funding diversity is characteristic of the Danish NGO landscape, where organizations often blend public grants, private donations, and earned income to maintain stability (CISU, 2024). Despite receiving financial support from multiple sources, BYN still must navigate the consistent issue of dealing with between short term project demands and long-term strategic goals.

The organization also sustains its operations through a digitally managed membership model that encourages broader community involvement. BYN offers different membership tiers: Youth Membership (under 30 years old) for DKK 75 per year, Standard Membership for DKK 200 per year, and Family

Membership for DKK 300 per year. This tiered system is administered through the NGO's webpage, where members can register, make payments, and access exclusive digital content. Members receive benefits including discounted access to events, exclusive access to education and training programs, networking opportunities with like-minded individuals, and a monthly newsletter delivered via email. The membership database serves as an important digital asset for the organization, allowing targeted communication and providing a stable base of supporters besides the inconsistent project funding.

My Field Position and Experience at BYN

As part of my fieldwork, I was assigned to assist with two of the organization's key initiatives: the school workshop program and the Ukraine refugee support project (which I will call "Ukraine team" throughout the thesis). My involvement with the school workshop team included helping organize and facilitate educational sessions for Danish boarding school students, where we taught critical digital literacy skills through interactive activities. As I wrote in my notes, *"we were 4 people teaching 70 boarding school kids one day, and it went really well"* (Field notes, September 14, 2023). The energy was chaotic but fun, and we managed to have a rather successful workshop with help from some of the students' teachers.

While participating in the Ukraine team, I contributed to efforts aimed at building support networks for young Ukrainian refugees in Denmark. This involved creating spaces where they could connect both with other Ukrainians and with local Danes, helping them feel more at home and integrated. This work aligned with my original motivation to join an organization engaged in social justice and anti-racism efforts. It also became closely linked to my revised research question, which focuses on how digital tools are integrated into BYN's work.

These dual roles gave me firsthand experience with BYN's different leadership styles and documentation approaches - I observed how the team leader of the Ukraine support project that I took part in, Poul, *"stressed the need of documenting meetings"*, which in practice meant creating thorough notes of the meeting and its content (Field Notes, October 10, 2023).

Poul is 43 years old and Danish educated through the Kaospilot program in Aarhus, known for its focus on creative leadership, social innovation, and effective workshop facilitation (Kaospilot, n.d.). He emphasizes practical methods and interactive workshop formats, often using concepts like the World Café, which encourages group dialogue through rotating, small-group conversations designed to promote participation and shared reflection (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). Before joining BYN, he organized a large event for 200 to 300 young Ukrainian refugees with creative workshops and activities designed to empower them. He brings this same energetic and thorough approach to BYN, carefully documenting activities and ensuring clear communication within the Ukraine team.

Moreover, it was expected to do homework and prepare for the next meetings as well. In contrast, the school workshop team did not document progressively as intensely but still had shared documents and took notes during meetings (Field notes, September 6, 2023). This positioning allowed me to directly experience how BYN balances in-person engagement with digital coordination and knowledge management, particularly in projects serving diverse youth populations across cultural boundaries.

Even though I repeatedly explained that I was there to do research, I was still treated as an intern. I joined meetings, helped with reports, and eventually took part in planning and running activities. This close involvement provided useful insight into the organization's culture and daily work, but it also showed how unclear roles can be both helpful and challenging. The flexibility helped me build trust by working alongside others, but it also made it hard to know what was expected of me. At times, the line between being a researcher and being a staff member felt blurred, which made it more difficult to stay objective and keep a distance as a researcher.

Small and Medium-sized NGOs: Organizational Structure and Vulnerability

BYN operates with a small but diverse office team: five full-time staff members alongside four interns from The European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ program. This structure is common among small and medium-sized NGOs that must balance their social mission with resource constraints (Froelich, 1999; Lewis, 2014). During my three-month fieldwork, I saw people come and go as interns finished their stay and new ones arrived.

As I noted on my first day: *"I quickly noticed that it was generally a young NGO (the office team at least). The board consists of professionals who are older."* (Field notes, September 1, 2023). This mix shapes how the organization functions. The young team brings energy, adaptability, and ease with digital tools, while the more experienced board offers long-term perspective and strategic guidance - even if their presence is not part of the everyday office routine. This balance between daily flexibility and broader oversight reflects BYN's position as a mix of a grassroot- and a developing professional organization.

Leadership at BYN consisted of the founder/leader and a board of directors supported by an advisory board of external professionals. However, the boundaries between employees and interns were often blurred, with individuals taking on multiple roles depending on immediate needs and interests. The blurring of formal roles was evident from my earliest field observations, as I noted: *"The NGO consists of several different teams (one main focus per team), where teams can also change, and some staff members may be attached to more than one team"* (Field notes, September 1, 2023). This flexible team structure enables the organization to respond quickly to emerging needs and opportunities but also creates challenges for knowledge continuity when team structure changes.

The physical setup at BYN reinforces the organization's collaborative and flexible work culture. The building houses several NGOs across two floors and includes shared areas like "the glass room," often used for collaborative meetings with international partners. These surroundings encourage informal exchange, openness, and shared learning, both within BYN and across neighboring organizations. This emphasis on openness is mirrored in BYN's internal culture, which is based on trust and flexibility. Staff have varied schedules and can work from home one or two days a week.

While this autonomy supports a results-oriented mindset, it also puts more pressure on digital tools to ensure continuity and coordination. The open-plan office further shaped these practices. In-person staff often shared updates verbally across desks, reducing the perceived need to document work digitally. While efficient for those on-site, this reliance on informal communication excluded remote or part-time volunteers who depended on digital tools to stay informed. In this way, the physical space not only facilitated spontaneous collaboration but also contributed to uneven access to information, showing how workspace arrangements can strengthen or weaken digital routines.

Moreover, the physical setup of the workspace reinforces BYN's fluid approach to roles and hierarchies. As I noted on September 6: *"Another aspect of the dynamic work environment is that there were no fixed seats. People could be sitting in different places in the small office space from day to day"* (Field notes, September 6, 2023). This lack of assigned seating reflects the organization's non-hierarchical culture and allowed for spontaneous collaboration. However, it also led to small practical challenges; for example, people not always knowing where to sit, which may have disrupted the sense of structure for those who preferred having a fixed spot for focus, comfort, or routine.

BYN differs from larger, established NGOs in several ways. While large organizations typically have robust administrative systems and stable funding (Bies and Blackwood, 2007), small and medium-sized NGOs like BYN generally lack three essential resources: consistent money coming in, permanent staff members, and well-developed technology systems. Instead, they rely on adaptability, interpersonal trust, and a strong sense of mission to navigate both daily tasks and long-term goals (Lewis, 2014). For instance, when there was a pressing need to support Ukrainian refugees in Denmark, BYN could not rely on established protocols or dedicated staff. Instead, they quickly brought together available interns, used personal networks, and adapted existing resources to create a program that helped refugees connect with both other Ukrainians across the country and with Danish people and organizations. This dynamic organizational context creates both unique strengths and weaknesses that shape how work is conducted and how digital tools are integrated into practice (Bryson et al., 2015).

Knowledge Continuity Challenges

One persistent challenge BYN and similar NGOs face is maintaining organizational continuity. Staff frequently rotate because many positions are filled through short-term programs like Erasmus+ or the European Solidarity Corps. These programs offer a more affordable way to get support without hiring full-time staff, which makes them a solid option for organizations with limited budgets (Seo, 2016). However, this turnover often leads to lost institutional knowledge, with new team members spending valuable time catching up rather than building on previous work (Hudson, 2009), as Poul explained*: "When you are working in an NGO, the process is not always written down like in a corporate setting. You learn as you go, which means a lot of critical knowledge disappears when people leave"* (Poul, 2023).

The knowledge management challenges at BYN can be better understood using Brown and Duguid's (2001) concept of "communities of practice," which highlights how knowledge often develops through shared work and informal relationships rather than formal documentation. At BYN, important knowledge was often held within small teams working closely together. These groups built shared understandings through experience, but much of this knowledge remained unspoken. When someone left, their practical knowledge often left with them, even if some documents were available.

This was clear in the school workshop team. Experienced facilitators knew how to handle classroom situations that were not described in the written materials. For example, during one workshop I observed, Anne, the school workshop leader, quickly adapted an activity when students finished early. When I asked how she knew what to do, she simply said, *"You just get a feel for it after a few workshops"* (Field notes, September 14, 2023). This shows an important problem: the practical knowledge that skilled staff possess is difficult to store in digital folders. When experienced people leave BYN, they take these skills with them, and the new staff must learn almost everything from scratch. Digital tools alone cannot capture this kind of hands-on knowledge, which is why staff turnover hits small NGOs so hard.

From an Organizational Learning Theory perspective, BYN showed a gap between what it said it did and what actually happened. The organization aimed for clear documentation, with shared drives and templates, but in reality, staff often shared knowledge through direct interaction. This shows the limits of digital systems when tacit knowledge is not actively turned into something others can access.

One specific example illustrates this vulnerability: if the staff member responsible for the “Food for Change” concept were to leave the organization at the end of her contract, there is a risk that her specialized knowledge would be lost. Over time, she developed effective recruitment strategies using local Facebook groups. She also created a fast post-dinner feedback system with QR codes that collect responses within minutes. Without robust documentation processes, much of this practical knowledge might not be passed on

to the one who will host the future dinners. This means her replacement will need to rebuild these community connections and rediscover which outreach methods work best, potentially spending weeks redeveloping processes that have already been developed.

This vulnerability can lead to frustration among long-term staff and poses a structural risk to the organization's sustainability. When knowledge is stored in individuals rather than in shared digital systems, progress becomes fragile and depends on who happens to be present, rather than on stable organizational routines. Moreover, most of the staff were aware of this issue and expressed a clear desire for more continuity, but they often lacked the time and resources to put lasting solutions in place. This tension between what was needed and what was realistically possible was a recurring theme throughout my fieldwork (Hager et al., 2004).

Digital Technologies as Potential Solutions

The NGO sector continuously must adapt to new digital technologies or get used to new updates on the ones they are already using to manage their work and to be able to reach their goals. Cloud storage, project management tools and social media are now widespread across the nonprofit sector. At BYN for example, Microsoft Teams was used to organize files, and Trello was used to coordinate projects and bring together ideas from different team members. Moreover, these digital tools help to address the problem of continuity as they centralize knowledge and hereby make it smoother for new team members to quickly understand the content of the given project (Cortés and Rafter, 2007). Hereby, it may reduce the dependency on individual memory, which may strengthen workflow and engagement (Salamon, 2015).

Before I dive into specific challenges and opportunities at BYN, it is essential to understand which technologies they use, both internally to structure daily work, externally with partners- and to reach target groups. Each of these examples are based on specific fieldwork observations and interviews with the goal of shedding light on how digital tools are used for knowledge management, communication (locally and cross-border), and outreach:

Table 1: Overview of Key Technologies Used by BYN

Category	Technologies Used	Examples from Fieldwork
Internal Work & Coordination	Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Drive, Trello	Daily internal communication via Teams chat
Knowledge Sharing & Onboarding	Microsoft Teams, Google Drive, Trello	Tips from current colleagues and previous staff saved in shared folders
Cross-border Collaboration	Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Docs	Armenian partnership co-developed workshop plans online via Zoom and Google Docs
Public Outreach & Visibility	Webpage, Instagram, Facebook Events, LinkedIn, Canva, Flyers, Posters	Instagram campaigns to promote events and reach youth audiences and use of physical posters for an upcoming “Food for Thought”
Youth Engagement & Inclusion	Webpage, Instagram Reels, Telegram, Facebook Groups, WhatsApp, Flyers, Posters	Short videos and visual posts used to engage young audiences; flyers shared at events

This overview highlights how BYN, despite limited resources, tries to build a diverse digital ecosystem by relying on different free or low-cost tools. Many digital tools are used across different teams and tasks, but their effectiveness often depends on how well each group adapts the tool to its specific needs.

Some tools worked efficiently and supported team workflows well, while others led to unexpected confusion or friction. The same platform could be a good fit for one team but feel completely unusable for another. This variation highlights how BYN, despite limited resources, tries to build a workable digital ecosystem by relying on free or low-cost tools. Many platforms are used across different teams and tasks, but their effectiveness often depends on how well each group adapts the tool to its specific needs.

In these smaller organizations, digital transformation happens under conditions quite different from those in larger companies, with limited resources and frequent personnel changes affecting how technologies are adopted. As Hackler and Saxton (2007) point out, nonprofit organizations often struggle to fully make use of digital tools because of staffing limitations, shifting priorities, and uneven levels of technical skill. At BYN, I saw similar patterns. Digital systems like Microsoft Teams, Google Drive, or Trello had been set up with good

intentions, but without much training or follow up. This meant the tools were used inconsistently, and not always integrated into everyday routines. These challenges are not just technical but are shaped by the work culture and the people involved. That is also what makes this kind of case interesting. It shows how digital tools are adopted in more flexible and sometimes improvised ways that reflect the realities of small organizations trying to keep things going with what they have. A more systematic approach to digital documentation could potentially strengthen collaboration and collective learning.

Implementing digital tools at BYN, as in many similar organizations, was not straightforward. Technology operates within specific social and organizational contexts shaped by shifting roles. It is also influenced by differing technical skills, time constraints, and unequal access to resources (Unwin, 2017). The employee who was primarily in charge of maintaining the website and leading the design team explained that although there were efforts to organize information using platforms like Microsoft Teams and Google Drive, much of the actual communication still happened informally through face-to-face conversations. People often knew who to talk to, which meant that important information was shared verbally between a few individuals rather than stored in a way that the entire team could access. This led to fragmentation and inconsistency.

Some staff members actively engaged with shared platforms, while others avoided them. At times, cloud folders enabled smooth collaboration. At other times, documents were difficult to locate or completely missing. During my second week at BYN, I noticed that meeting notes and planning spreadsheets were stored in Microsoft Teams within a structured folder system. Although the system was straightforward for long-term staff, new staff members often found it confusing and needed help from others to understand how it worked.

Digital Practices vs. Organizational Dynamics at BYN

This gap between potential and implementation at BYN can be understood through Orlikowski's (2000) concept of "technologies-in-practice," which distinguishes between intended functions of technologies and their actual use in specific contexts. In small and medium-sized NGOs like BYN, there is a disconnect between the ideal use of digital tools (as stable repositories of knowledge) and their reality (as fragmented, person dependent systems). For example, the intentions of the Microsoft Teams folders were to store knowledge in a structured and comprehensive way, but some projects were well documented, while others were messy. This left new staff unsure about where to find information without having to ask colleagues verbally.

This is not only about the technology functions by itself, but how work is being organized, who is responsible for deciding which tools to use in a certain situation, and which organizational values that need to be maintained (Leonardi and Barley, 2010). This means that the organizational culture also affects whether digital technologies are embraced, adapted, or abandoned. Daily work practices affect how often these tools

are being used, while power dynamics from the leader and board, for example, also influence which tools are finally chosen and which are not.

In addition to this, these practical actions may reveal even deeper issues. According to Mergel et al. (2019), digital transformation is often portrayed as a linear process that can be planned and completed. When no one took responsibility for storing or managing knowledge, it was simply deprioritized, which shows how small and medium-sized NGOs face vulnerabilities. The flexibility in this sense may be a strength, but without structured roles and long-term staff, BYN may risk losing knowledge when members leave.

However, at BYN, digital practices have mainly evolved through the individuals who have been working in the office and the skills and competencies they brought to the NGO. One example was Peter, the intern from Romania, who already had self-taught skills in graphic design even though he normally worked as an elementary school teacher in Bucharest. He used Canva just like Meera, the graphic design lead of BYN (who I will introduce later), and therefore it became a central tool to use in daily work, as these two individuals preferred Canva, which in this case shows how the staff members themselves choose the technology when having to carry out a task.

Finally, the challenges I observed at BYN reflect broader patterns in how small and medium-sized NGOs work with digital technologies. To place these observations in context, the following literature review looks at how earlier research has explored the connection between NGOs, digital tools, and knowledge sharing, and points to key gaps this thesis aims to address.

Literature Review

NGOs, Digital Technologies, and Knowledge in Practice

Most NGO research focuses on large international organizations like Oxfam or Doctors Without Borders; organizations that have established structures and stable funding (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Lewis, 2014). While these organizations play important roles in humanitarian work, Banks et al. (2015) points out that small and medium-sized NGOs make up most of the sector but receive less research attention. According to Hudson (2009), smaller organizations often depend on adaptability, volunteer contributions, and the personal dedication of their members or donors. Their size and structure often make them more agile, but also more vulnerable to issues like discontinuity, informal processes, and weak internal documentation.

What distinguishes smaller NGOs from their larger counterparts is not just their size but their operational dynamics. Unlike larger NGOs with specialized departments, small organizations often operate with blurred roles, where staff take on multiple responsibilities. Lewis (2014) notes that this structure with flexible staff

members extends to their use of digital tools, where personal and organizational technologies often stem from necessity rather than careful planning. According to Mano (2014), staff may use personal devices for organizational work, creating both opportunities for flexibility and risks for continuity.

Digital Transformation in NGOs

In recent years, digital platforms have been promoted as solutions for improving internal coordination, communication, visibility, and institutional memory (Salamon, 2015; Unwin, 2017), but after conducting fieldwork at BYN for a few weeks, I realized the reality is messier than these academic suggestions.

Particularly in small and medium-sized NGOs, free and accessible tools like Google Drive, Trello, and Microsoft Teams offer potential for managing knowledge across shifting teams. McNutt et al. (2018) note these tools are not only used for external communication but also for internal task management, shared documentation, onboarding, and archiving. However, while the technology itself may be accessible and seem easy to implement, Zorn et al. (2011) find that its integration into daily work depends on the people using it, their available time, their technical skills, and the organization's internal dynamics, meaning that adaptation can vary widely.

Ebrahim and Rangan (2010) describe a "nonprofit midlife crisis," where many medium-sized organizations struggle to scale their systems and processes as they grow. During these transition periods, digital tools are often adopted reactively rather than through careful planning. This leads to what Hackler and Saxton (2007) call "digital patchworks", which consists of collections of technologies taken up at different times by different people for different purposes, without any clear integration leading to fragmentation.

In prolonging, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how digital transformation happens across different types and sizes of NGOs. Carroll and Stater (2009) observe that smaller NGOs often use technology in a more flexible and fragmented way, based on what staff members know and what is needed at the time.

Digital work practices in these settings are often improvised, making the adoption of digital tools highly dependent on the local context, especially when staff turnover is high (Baptista et al., 2020). Small and medium-sized NGOs often demonstrate what Bryer and Zavattaro (2011) call "pragmatic innovation", meaning that they find creative ways to use digital tools beyond their original purposes to solve urgent tasks. For example, messaging apps designed for personal communication may become project management tools, or social media platforms can turn into informal knowledge repositories. According to Merkel et al. (2007), this adaptability is both a strength and a vulnerability; it enables organizations to work despite resource constraints but can create challenges for standardization and knowledge transfer.

Technology Is Never Just Technology

Digital technologies are never just neutral or solely technical. Van Dijk (2020) points out that platforms and tools often reflect social ideas, shape how people work together, and sometimes create new problems or inequalities. Even basic tasks like uploading a file or updating a shared document rely on shared norms and expectations. When these are missing, digital systems can fail-or even make confusion and fragmentation worse. These challenges are rarely visible from the outside but are part of the everyday effort to make small or medium-sized NGOs function.

In these NGOs, the social and technical sides of using digital tools are closely connected. As Zorn et al. (2011) point out, decisions about which technologies to use are often based on personal relationships rather than formal evaluations. For example, an intern might suggest a tool they already know, or a board member might recommend something they use at their job. In this way, technology choices are shaped by the organization's culture and the personal networks within it.

The issue of digital continuity in small and medium-sized NGOs is a significant but often overlooked challenge. Saidel and Cour (2003) note that many small organizations live in a state of "perpetual transition," where ongoing staff changes and unstable funding cycles prevent them from building long-term stability. As people come and go, Huysman and de Wit (2004) describe how this leads to "knowledge amnesia"- the repeated loss and rediscovery of important organizational knowledge. Digital tools are often seen as a solution to this problem, but they can also become part of it, especially when systems are abandoned after a key person leaves or when login details are lost during transitions.

Research Gap

These complex dynamics remain underexplored in existing literature. Much research on NGOs and digital transformation either focuses on large international organizations or presents technology as a neutral solution to structural problems (Brandsen et al., 2017; Godefroid et al., 2023). There is relatively little research on how small, intern-reliant NGOs like BYN adopt, adapt, and maintain digital systems over time (Eimhjellen et al., 2014).

BYN is a relevant example of this kind of organization. It runs on limited funding and short-term staffing. Its digital practices often depend more on who happens to be working there than on any long-term plan. People used different tools based on their habits, preferences, or what they felt comfortable with. Digital platforms were present, but how they were used varied a lot.

When small and medium-sized NGOs are discussed, they are often framed as falling behind or needing to "catch up" (Duncombe, 2006; McNutt et al., 2018). These narratives overlook the complex realities of how

digital practices emerge in settings marked by resource scarcity, temporary staff, and mission-driven work rather than formal structures (Ebrahim, 2003).

There is also growing recognition that digital tools shape and are shaped by organizational culture (Aral et al., 2013). But the emotional and moral sides of this process still receive little attention. In NGOs built on values like inclusion, solidarity, and empowerment, digital decisions are not just technical or strategic. They are also relational, practical, and sometimes difficult. At BYN, everyday questions like "*Who updates the shared drive?*", *"Which platform do we use to engage youth?"*, or "*Do we have time to train new interns in this system?"* reflected deeper tensions between ideals and practical limitations (Mitzinneck and Besharov, 2019). These questions form the basis for the methodological choices presented in the following chapter.

What still seems to be missing in the literature is a grounded understanding of what happens when small NGOs adopt and maintain digital tools under difficult conditions. Many studies overlook the everyday challenges I observed during fieldwork, such as who takes responsibility for updating shared drives when someone leaves, how staff respond when they cannot access the tools they need, or why certain platforms are abandoned despite being effective. These experiences raise important questions about how digital decisions are shaped by values such as inclusion, participation, and resource fairness. These emotional and social dimensions directly relate to my research question about how NGOs work with digital platforms because they help explain why implementation is often uneven despite clear potential benefits. Understanding staff members' feelings about digital tools, their social relationships that facilitate coordination, and their moral commitments to accessibility can clarify why some technologies are embraced while others are abandoned.

This thesis addresses this gap by combining four different theories: Actor-Network Theory, Boundary objects, Technology Acceptance Model, and Organizational Learning Theory to understand what I was observing at BYN. Instead of trying to figure out whether their digital tools were working or failing, I wanted to understand how these tools became part of daily life, how staff members shaped them, and how personal relationships and limited resources influenced everything.

Methodology

The following methodology section explains how the research was designed and carried out, to show how the findings were developed and to ensure credibility in the study.

I designed this research as a qualitative case study to understand how BYN uses technology in daily operations. Instead of testing specific hypotheses, I wanted to explore how staff members experience and

work with digital tools. My approach is based on a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach (Krauss, 2005; van Manen, 2016), which means that I focus on people's lived experiences and how they make sense of them.
This involved paying close attention to how staff members experienced and understood their everyday work with digital tools. The goal is to explore how meaning is constructed in practice; for example, what it means to rely on digital tools in daily tasks, how staff values align with those of the organization, or how they make sense of challenges like staff turnover.

While my research question addresses small and medium-sized NGOs broadly, this thesis employs an in-depth case study of Borderless Youth Network (BYN) as a window into these broader dynamics. As Yin (2018) emphasizes, case studies are particularly valuable when investigating complex social phenomena within their real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. BYN represents what Stake (1995) would call an "instrumental case study," where a single case is examined primarily to provide insight into a wider issue.

The organization embodies many characteristics typical of small and medium-sized NGOs such as limited resources, high staff turnover, diverse project demands, and flexible organizational structures, which makes it an example that can improve the understanding of the challenges and opportunities of digital adoption in the sector more broadly. This methodological choice prioritizes depth over breadth, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how digital practices unfold in the day-to-day realities of organizational life.

By examining BYN's experiences with digital technologies, from knowledge management to outreach and internal coordination, the study reveals patterns and dynamics likely relevant to other small and medium-sized NGOs navigating similar constraints and opportunities. As Flyvbjerg (2006) adds, the detailed examination of a single case often reveals more about a phenomenon than statistical surveys across many cases, particularly when the goal is to understand complex social processes like technological adaptation. Case studies allow for close examination of specific practices, relationships, and challenges as they unfold in a particular setting. This fits well with my interest in how digital tools are used in everyday work at small and medium-sized NGOs.

Studying just one organization allowed me to spend more time in the field, build trust, and follow work processes more closely than would have been possible with a broader or more comparative design. While the insights from this study are not intended to represent all small and medium-sized NGOs, the aim is to develop a deeper understanding of patterns and challenges that may be relevant in similar contexts.

A phenomenological approach focuses on describing participants lived experiences, their feelings, thoughts, and perceptions of working in the NGO, while a hermeneutic approach focuses on how the researcher interprets those experiences in context. Following this approach, I recognized from the start that my own background and role would shape the research. I stayed reflexive throughout the project, regularly reflecting on how my dual role as an embedded researcher (and sometimes an active team member) influenced the data I collected and the conclusions I reached. This reflexivity is part of the hermeneutic tradition, which sees research as a two-way process between the researcher and the subject.

By using this interpretive, qualitative framework, I aim to show a fuller picture of the NGO's everyday life, the daily work routines and staff members' stories.

Fieldwork Setting and Data Collection

I conducted fieldwork over a three-month period as a participant-observer within Borderless Youth Network. Initially, a two-month stay was planned, but this was extended to three months as my involvement deepened and opportunities for additional insight arose. Being on-site (in the NGO's office, in school workshops, and at its events) for an extended period allowed for immersive understanding of the organization's culture, routines, and use of technology. I was present daily, engaging in both ordinary tasks and larger projects, which provided a closer view of how the NGO operates and adapts to challenges in real time.

The extended immersion at BYN aligns with what Geertz (1973) calls "thick description" - a methodological approach that prioritizes deep contextual understanding over breadth. This approach allowed me to study digital practices first-hand in small and medium-sized NGOs, where the formal policies (for example of which digital tools to use) might differ from the actual real-life practices. In this case, the NGO used Microsoft Teams as the main channel to communicate through and this was encouraged by the leader as well, but staff members and target groups of BYN were using a range of different tools, as mentioned.

Moreover, I would not have been able to figure out that the Ukrainian youth preferred WhatsAPP if I did not take part in the project. This immersive approach helped me understand which digital tools were adopted in theory, and how they were used or avoided in daily routines (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

Participant Observation and Ethical Considerations

One of the main methods I employed in this study was participant observation (Spradley, 1980; Emerson et al., 2011). This meant that I took an active part in the organization while also observing what was going on and collected data for my thesis. In practice, that included attending staff meetings, helping to organize events, using the NGO's digital tools with other team members, and having different responsibilities. These included helping with a youth workshop for Ukrainian refugees, a project for displaced youth from the

conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Davtyan, 2023) and co-hosting a workshop for boarding school students.

I had a chance to observe how technology was used in daily work through these activities and to understand how decisions were made in different contexts. For example, during a group exercise at one of the school workshops in Denmark, the team used PowerPoint slides and a digital timer to keep track of time, while microphones were used to guide and support the students.

To remember what I observed, I carried a small notebook during my three months stay and used it to write short observations throughout the day. I also took digital notes on my laptop. During workdays at BYN, I usually wrote in the notebook when I had a chance, focusing on how digital tools were used, what people talked about, and how the organization worked. Later, when I had more time and when it was possible, I expanded these notes on my laptop, mainly during the nights at home. The notebook was especially useful in moments when it would have felt awkward to bring a laptop, for example during informal conversations or while walking around. However, the structured notes I had on my laptop made it easier to write more detailed notes and organize them meanwhile it helped me in relation to developing early themes. This combination of physical and digital notes helped me document observations and make better sense of them.

These notes included examples of how the office team used Microsoft Teams chat for quick coordination, or how knowledge was transferred or sometimes lost when an intern finished their stay. Being an "insider" allowed me to experience both the benefits and frustrations of the NGO's technology use, from the convenience of cloud documents to the delays that occurred when team members struggled to find the latest version of a file.

Balancing my dual role was challenging at times. The NGO’s leader introduced me as an intern instead of a researcher, which caused some confusion not only for myself but also among staff members. To address this, I reminded people of my research role when I found it necessary, particularly during interviews. This close involvement helped build trust and encouraged more openness, but I tried to step back and observe when needed.

As I became more involved, I also had more responsibility. This included managing project deadlines, helping with funding applications, and leading the educational activity aimed at supporting young people who had been displaced by the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh. I also took part in projects that focused on improving the integration and general well-being of Ukrainian refugees living in Denmark. These experiences gave me useful insights into how the NGO worked from the inside, but they also took crucial time away from my main

research. Taking on more practical tasks gave me a deeper understanding of the organization, but it also meant that I had less time to focus on collecting data.

I also took part in several school workshops that BYN organized for Danish boarding school students aged fourteen to fifteen. These sessions focused on digital topics such as fake news, online bullying, and how to be a responsible digital citizen. At the end of the workshops, the students participated in debates between schools, which showed how digital literacy can help young people engage with digital challenges. Being part of these workshops gave me a clear picture of how BYN tried to reach out to young people using digital tools and what that looked like in practice.

By the end of my time at BYN, I had collected detailed field notes about everyday interactions, how different technologies were used, and key events, such as the arrival of new interns and how the team worked with funding applications. These notes form the basis for answering my research question about how small and medium-sized NGOs use digital platforms and what roles these technologies play in their work.

Given the close engagement with people at BYN meant that I had to think carefully about research ethics. I changed all the names in the thesis and used pseudonyms to protect participants, including the organization itself. Furthermore, I had permission from the leader to conduct on-site research, and I obtained informed consent from all participants as I invited them to take part in interviews during the fieldwork. I explained the purpose of the research and the types of activities I would be involved in. This included observation, note taking, and interviews, and l also made it clear that taking part was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time.

For the interviews, each person either signed a consent form or gave recorded verbal consent, agreeing to be interviewed and quoted anonymously. I refer to people by their first name or role, for example "Peter, intern" instead of using their full real names. If any details, especially sensitive ones, could be linked back to a specific individual, I either changed them slightly or chose not to include them. I also tried to create a relaxed setting during interviews and reminded participants that there were no right or wrong answers to my questions.

Another important ethical consideration was how to handle the expectations that came with my dual role. Since many people saw me as an intern, they asked for help with different tasks that would not usually be expected from a researcher. In many situations, I chose to help, as this also gave me the chance to observe everyday routines and see how digital tools were used in different parts of the organization.

I tried to make sure that my involvement did not conflict with my role as a researcher. For instance, I was careful not to take on tasks that might give me authority over others, as this potentially would have weakened the voluntary nature of their participation.

In addition, I was mindful of power dynamics during interviews. Although I was often seen as a staff member, I was still conducting research for my thesis, which may have felt intimidating for some of the younger interns. For example, a new intern from Japan who arrived late in my fieldwork period chose not to participate in an interview. She expressed concern about her English skills and said she felt nervous. Instead, she asked if she could respond to the interview questions by text, but I never received her answers.

Privacy and data security were handled carefully throughout the project. All interview recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected device and not shared. In field notes containing sensitive observations, such as when an intern criticized a particular approach, I kept these secure and either anonymized these comments or obtained permission to include important critical insights.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To complement participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 participants from the NGO, which helped to represent the diverse roles and perspectives. This included:

I interviewed 12 people from the organization:

1. The founder and leader, who runs BYN and makes key decisions.
2. Five full-time staff members, including Social Media Manager, Project Coordinator, Global Project Coordinator, Graphic Design Lead and Finance Manager.
3. Two Erasmus+ interns who helped with daily tasks and projects.
4. Three volunteers from the European Solidarity Corps who worked on different projects for a few months.
5. One short-term employee hired to support a project for Ukrainian refugees.

The interviews were semi-structured (Kvale, 1996): I prepared a guide with key topics such as "personal values and motivation", "daily work routines and use of technology", "examples of technology supporting collaboration", and "experiences related to BYN's mission", but also made sure to allow conversations to flow naturally and followed up with more questions if interesting points emerged. A few interviewees were nervous about being interviewed, so I offered to share my interview questions with them beforehand. This

often helped them relax and feel more confident, which in turn led to more open conversations and deeper reflections.

I applied a sampling strategy to ensure a range of different perspectives (Patton, 2015). Intentionally, I tried to set up interviews with staff-members with different roles, backgrounds and experiences within BYN's office team.
To understand how digital practices varied, it was essential to have a diverse sampling group, as the members from the office team had different expertise, roles and cultural backgrounds.

For example, interviewing both the Social Media Manager (who had advanced digital skills) and short-term interns (who were still learning the systems) revealed important contrasts in how digital tools were perceived and utilized. Besides, new staff members would in general be more hesitant to criticize BYN during the interviews and would in general talk positively about the NGO.

Each interview lasted about 20 to 45 minutes and was conducted in an open-ended manner, often held at the office, a nearby room in the building or outside in the yard of the building when the weather allowed. For example, I asked participants about their personal values, what motivated them to join BYN, their daily work routines, how they used technology in everyday tasks, and how they collaborated or shared knowledge. One interviewee explained how shared folders on Microsoft Teams were used to manage documents, which led to a discussion about challenges such as responsibility and missing information. This revealed how technical issues (folder structure) may get entangled with organizational dynamics (unclear responsibilities for maintaining the folders). This might have been a connection I would have missed if I did not apply semi-structured interviews.

The semi-structured format helped to cover the same topics with each participant while still allowing them to bring up their own insights or examples. This flexibility was important in a dynamic environment like BYN, where some of the most valuable information, such as stories about dealing with limited resources, disorganized files or leadership approaches, came up naturally during conversation rather than from the prepared questions.

Additional Data

Alongside observations and interviews, I collected 23 relevant documents and materials to better understand the case: These were grouped into three main categories:

1. Internal organizational documents (9):

- Meeting notes from staff meetings (5)
- Project reports and evaluation documents (3)
- Strategic plan and annual goals (1)

2. Public materials (9):

- BYN's website content and structure (1)
- Social media posts from Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn (3 months)
- Monthly newsletters (3)
- Promotional materials, such as event flyers and campaigns (3)

3. Project-specific documents (5):

- School workshop curriculum materials (2)
- Ukraine refugee support project documentation (2)
- Social media strategy document (1)

Although I did not examine the documents as closely as the interviews and field notes, they still gave important context and sometimes supported what people had told me during conversations. For example, the project documents helped me understand how digital tools were used in different projects, and they showed that different teams often had their own ways of working. By combining what I observed, what I heard in the interviews, and what I found in the documents, I was able to build a more detailed and balanced picture of how technology was used at BYN.

Data Analysis

To analyze my data, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. I began by generating initial codes based on recurring patterns, statements, and practices related to BYN's use of digital tools. To keep the process systematic and transparent, I created a codebook that I updated as the analysis developed. Below is an overview of key codes and examples from the dataset:

Table 2: Overview of Codes and Examples

Codes:	Examples:
Digital knowledge preservation	Instances where technology is used to document and store organizational knowledge
Inconsistent digital practices	Situations where the use of digital tools varies significantly between teams or individuals
Technology bridging cultural divides	Examples of digital tools facilitating understanding and communication across cultural differences
Technical skill variations	Differences in digital literacy or competence among staff that affect technology use
Resource constraints affecting digital adoption	How limited resources influence choices about technology acquisition and use
Digital tools in youth engagement	Specific ways technology is used to connect with young participants

After coding, I began to sort the material into broader themes by exploring how different codes related to each other. For example, codes such as “digital documentation practices,” “staff turnover effects,” and “onboarding challenges” pointed to a larger theme around knowledge management and continuity. Through this process, four main themes emerged:

1. **Organizational learning and knowledge management**
2. **Digital tools for global youth engagement**
3. **Building cross-cultural communities through technology**
4. **Technology constraints and digital inequality**

Each theme also contained sub-themes that captured more specific patterns in the data. For instance, under Organizational learning and knowledge management, I included sub-themes such as onboarding processes and informal knowledge sharing.

I then reviewed and refined the themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data. In some cases, I recategorized or merged themes. For example, inconsistent digital practices worked better as a sub-theme rather than a standalone theme. A new theme also emerged around the balance between digital and personal interaction, as several participants emphasized the importance of combining digital tools with face-to-face contact.

Finally, I connected the themes to relevant theoretical frameworks and literature to build the analysis chapters. I selected examples that reflected key points and aimed to balance descriptive detail with interpretation. Throughout the process, I remained aware of how my role may have shaped the analysis.

Navigating Dual Roles: Trust, Transparency, and Reflexivity in Fieldwork

As mentioned, my role in this research was dual in nature, which required careful reflection. Being both a researcher and a participant in daily activities fits what Adler and Adler (1987) describe as the complete member researcher. This role gave me access to the internal work at BYN, but it also required constant attention to boundaries and analytical distance.

Many of the interns at BYN were around the same age as me, which made it easier to build trust and connect with them. This insider position allowed for more natural conversations about day-to-day challenges and personal experiences that might otherwise have been difficult to access.

While this closeness helped strengthen the authenticity of the data, it also introduced ethical and methodological challenges. To manage these, I used several strategies. First, I was transparent about my research goals and regularly reminded participants of my dual role, especially before conducting interviews. This helped ensure that informed consent remained clear and ongoing throughout the fieldwork.

Second, I developed a habit of switching between a participant mindset and an observer mindset. For example, I would take part in a staff meeting but later write notes about how communication tools were used or how decisions were made. This back and forth helped me maintain analytical distance even while involved.

Third, I kept a reflexive notebook where I documented what I saw and how I interpreted it, including any possible bias. I often had to ask myself questions such as, *"How is my personal investment in this project affecting what I notice or prioritize?"* and "*Am I favoring certain interpretations because of my growing connections with particular staff members?*".

At times, I had to clarify my researcher role to maintain distance and reduce potential bias. Being aware of my position helped me stay alert to these challenges. Even though the dual role required ongoing reflection, it gave me access to both the formal and informal sides of organizational life. By regularly reflecting on my position during fieldwork, I aimed to balance insider access with ethical awareness and analytical care.

While writing the thesis, I tried to clearly separate insights that came from my own involvement and from what participants shared with me (Dodgson, 2019).

The methodological approach outlined above is complemented by a theoretical framework that allows for multiple perspectives on the complex relationship between technology, organizational practices, and social dynamics. The following chapter introduces the four theoretical lenses that guide the analysis. Each theory focuses on different aspects of digital practices at BYN, but together they offer complementary insights into how digital tools are used and understood within the organization; ANT (Latour, 2005) focuses on the sociotechnical network as a whole, Boundary objects (Star and Griesemer, 1989) helps to examine how artifacts facilitate coordination across different communities, TAM (Davis, 1989) on individual adoption decisions, and Organizational Learning Theory (Argote and Miron Spektor, 2011) on organizational processes such as knowledge management.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

During the writing process of this thesis, I used AI assistance for specific tasks such as grammar checking, formatting, and generation of the frontpage picture. All analysis, interpretations, field observations, interview insights, and theoretical arguments are entirely my own work based on my three months of fieldwork at BYN.

Theoretical Framework

Actor-Network Theory (ANT)

Actor Network Theory (ANT) comes from science and technology studies (Latour, 2005; Callon, 1986). It argues that both human and nonhuman entities such as people, digital tools, documents, or policies should be treated equally as "actants" within a network. While "actors" usually refer to human agents in most traditional social science theories, ANT uses the term "actant" to show that nonhuman elements also play an active role in shaping outcomes (Latour, 2005). In this perspective, people, platforms, regulations, and funding structures all influence each other and has “agency” (the ability to make a difference or have effects, regardless of intention). In other words, change is not only driven by humans. It happens through the interactions between humans and technologies. In the context of BYN, ANT makes it possible to view the organization as a web of interconnected actants, including the leader, board members, employees, interns, digital tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, and organizational rules. For example, a shared Microsoft Teams folder may function as a significant actant by storing knowledge and shaping how new interns learn their roles. ANT’s concept of translation, which describes how different actors negotiate and align their goals (Callon, 1986), helps explain how new technologies are integrated. When the NGO introduced an online project management tool, staff had to adjust their workflows to fit the tool, aligning their efforts through the technology itself.

ANT also highlights that networks are fragile and constantly changing. A shift in one part, such as a key staff member leaving or a tool malfunctioning, can disrupt the entire network. For example, when Meera was absent for a week, nobody could update the website. Or when the internet connection failed during an important Zoom meeting with Armenian partners, the collaboration had to be rescheduled, which delayed the process. These disruptions showed me how dependent BYN was on specific people and technologies working together.

Meera, who is originally from India, runs her own graphic design studio in India and manages visual branding across BYN's platforms. She brings a very structured and professional design approach. This helps the NGO to have a clear outward identity and a coherent webpage.

Furthermore, ANT may help to deepen the issue of continuity challenges. If a project coordinator (human actor) leaves the NGO, then the digital knowledge base (nonhuman actant) can either preserve stability in the network by keeping knowledge (if the coordinator documented it well) or fail to do so, if malfunctioning or poorly maintained, which can lead to further disruption.

In addition to this, Latour (1987) notes that technologies often function as "black boxes", meaning that users often interact with mechanisms without understanding the complexities behind them - for example, using a digital tool to store knowledge without knowing how it is built up, coded and maintained but simply trusting that it does what it needs to. This process of black boxing allows organizational members to rely on technological infrastructure without having technical expertise to necessarily understand it. However, it can also become problematic when systems malfunction or key members depart from the NGO.

To sum up, ANT provides a sociotechnical angle, which helps to show how digital tools and people co-create outcomes. However, depending on ANT alone may not capture individual motivations behind technology adoption, and therefore I have chosen to integrate Boundary objects, TAM and Organizational Learning Theory as well.

Boundary objects Theory

Within science and technology studies (STS), the idea of boundary objects (Star and Griesemer, 1989) is particularly helpful to understand how digital technologies function within BYN. These artifacts help to bring diverse groups together, which makes it possible for people with different backgrounds or perspectives to work toward a common goal. At BYN, digital platforms like Microsoft Teams or PowerPoint presentations function as boundary objects. They enable staff and partners to coordinate work while maintaining their different viewpoints and needs.

Star and Griesemer (1989) defines a boundary object as artifacts that exist at the intersection of different social worlds, where they maintain enough common identity to be recognizable across different contexts, while at the same time being flexible enough to adapt to local needs and interpretations to enable cooperation without requiring full agreement.

Boundary objects are described as having four key characteristics that make them valuable analytical tools for understanding technology in organizational settings:

Common identity across contexts: They remain familiar, even when used differently by different groups.

Interpretive flexibility: They can be adapted to local needs without losing their overall purpose.

Robust structure: They remain organized and coherent, even when shared across different settings.

Allow diverse needs: They help people with different backgrounds or roles work together by meeting various needs at once.

When looking at small and medium-sized NGOs with high staff turnover and cross-cultural collaboration, seeing artifacts as boundary objects might help to bridge gaps across differences in expertise, language, culture, and geography. Artifacts like cloud storage platforms, communication apps, and shared digital materials can provide a common ground that different people interpret and use in ways that suit their own needs, which I will provide concrete examples of in the analysis.

This matters for small NGOs like BYN because they do not have the time or money to build or invest in new systems for each project. They need digital tools that work across teams and contexts while still holding things together. Boundary objects help explain why some artifacts manage this well and why others fail. If a tool is too rigid or too vague, people stop using it together and start working in isolation.

By using boundary objects to see technology as more than just a passive tool, it becomes possible to understand why digital implementation is uneven across different teams at BYN, and how technology can either support or weaken collaboration across cultural barriers. Lastly, the analysis will demonstrate how specific technologies at BYN functioned as boundary objects, facilitating cross-cultural collaboration and knowledge sharing despite differences in language, technical expertise, and organizational roles.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Furthermore, The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) was introduced by Fred Davis (1989). This model helps to explain what influences people to come to accept and use new technology. TAM identifies two main factors to identify this: "perceived usefulness", which looks to the degree a person believes using a technology will improve their performance, and "perceived ease of use", which covers how effortless the

system seems to learn and use. When I observed staff at BYN, I saw these individual evaluations happening, though not always consciously. This highlights why TAM is a useful lens for understanding how technologies are embraced, accepted, or abandoned in practice.

TAM was originally developed for corporate settings, but since then scholars have applied the framework to other contexts such as the nonprofit sector. For example, Saxton et al. (2010) observed that resource limitations clearly influence perceived usefulness, since organizations must balance technology choices between other priorities. This was evident at BYN, where free digital tools were prioritized even though paid alternatives might have a higher degree of "perceived ease of use". When Meera needed better design software, she had to choose between buying her own subscription, which would make her work easier, or using free alternatives that required workarounds but could be shared with the rest of the office team. The finances became part of how useful she perceived each option to be.

Moreover, Merkel et al. (2007) has expanded the theory within community organizations such as BYN, saying that the alignment between the organization's mission and adoption of tools often is involved in the process. In other words, staff are more likely to adopt tools that clearly support the organization's goals. This might help to explain why BYN staff embraced Instagram for youth outreach but were less motivated to use formal documentation systems that felt disconnected from their main mission.

Hackler and Saxton (2007) also observed that perceived ease of use plays an especially important role in nonprofits due to limited technical support and training. At BYN, this was reflected in the preference for familiar platforms like Microsoft Teams over more complex project management tools that would have required extra training - something that can be difficult to do continuously with rotating interns. For instance, Microsoft Teams was widely used because it supported collaboration across teams (high perceived usefulness) and most staff were already comfortable with its interface as they had used it before or knew Microsoft products (high perceived ease of use). In contrast, if the organization had tried to introduce a more advanced project management tool, some might find it too difficult to learn or see how it adds value.
This reflects TAM's central idea that adoption depends not just on the technology's features, but on how users perceive its usefulness and ease of use. At BYN, issues like time pressure, shifting projects, and a lack of clear onboarding influenced whether digital tools were implemented or not.

Even though TAM offers useful insights into individual decision-making around technology, it could not explain everything I observed. Sometimes people adopted technologies not because they personally found them useful or easy, but because everyone else was using them or they were needed for groupwork in one of the office teams. This is where Organizational Learning Theory provides an additional lens, helping to situate individual experiences within broader patterns of adaptation and change.

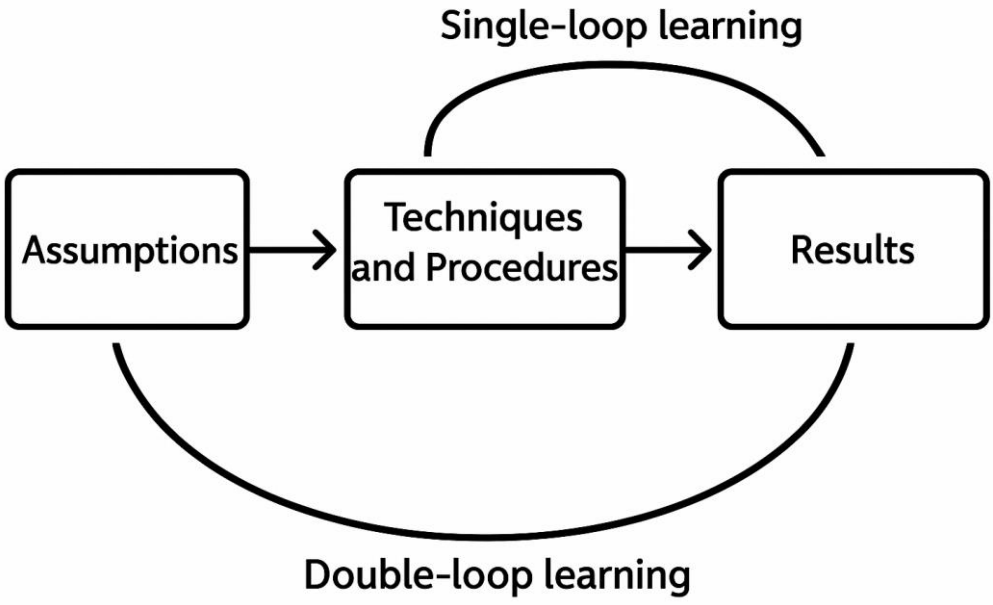
Sometimes people adopted technologies not because they personally found them useful or easy, but because everyone else was using them or they were needed to do groupwork in one of the office teams. I needed Organizational Learning Theory to understand these social and cultural influences on technology choices.

Organizational Learning Theory

Lastly, Organizational Learning Theory helps to understand how knowledge is created, maintained and shared within organizations to aid long-term improvements (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). In relation to BYN, it is mainly relevant in relation to the loss of knowledge, which for example is caused by constant staff turnover. By taking this perspective, the NGO can be seen as a big learning system, where it is crucial to capture the experiences from individuals within the system to store organizational memory (Walsh and Ungson, 1991).

One of the beneficial key concepts within this theory is the single-loop vs. double-loop learning model introduced by Argyris & Schön (1978). Single-loop learning means fixing immediate problems (one example could be thoroughly training a newly hired employee to fill the role of a former one), whereas double-loop learning also includes reflecting on the underlying processes and asking if it needs to change (for example to create a knowledge management system to store knowledge, which then might decrease the time it takes to train a new staff-member).

Figure 1: Single and double-loop learning



The model illustrates this concept by showing how single loop learning focuses on improving techniques and procedures to move from assumptions to results. In contrast, double loop learning involves questioning the underlying assumptions that guide the organization's actions, leading to deeper change. The figure includes three connected boxes: assumptions (why we do what we do), techniques and procedures (how we do things), and results (what we achieve), with arrows showing the learning feedback loops.

At BYN, this helps explain some of their knowledge management challenges. For instance, single-loop learning occurs when new interns receive quick task training face to face without necessarily being told the reasons behind the tasks, whereas double-loop learning happens when staff also create shared documents that are straightforward for newcomers to understand. This reflects a different mindset that improves the process itself instead of just solving immediate individual cases.

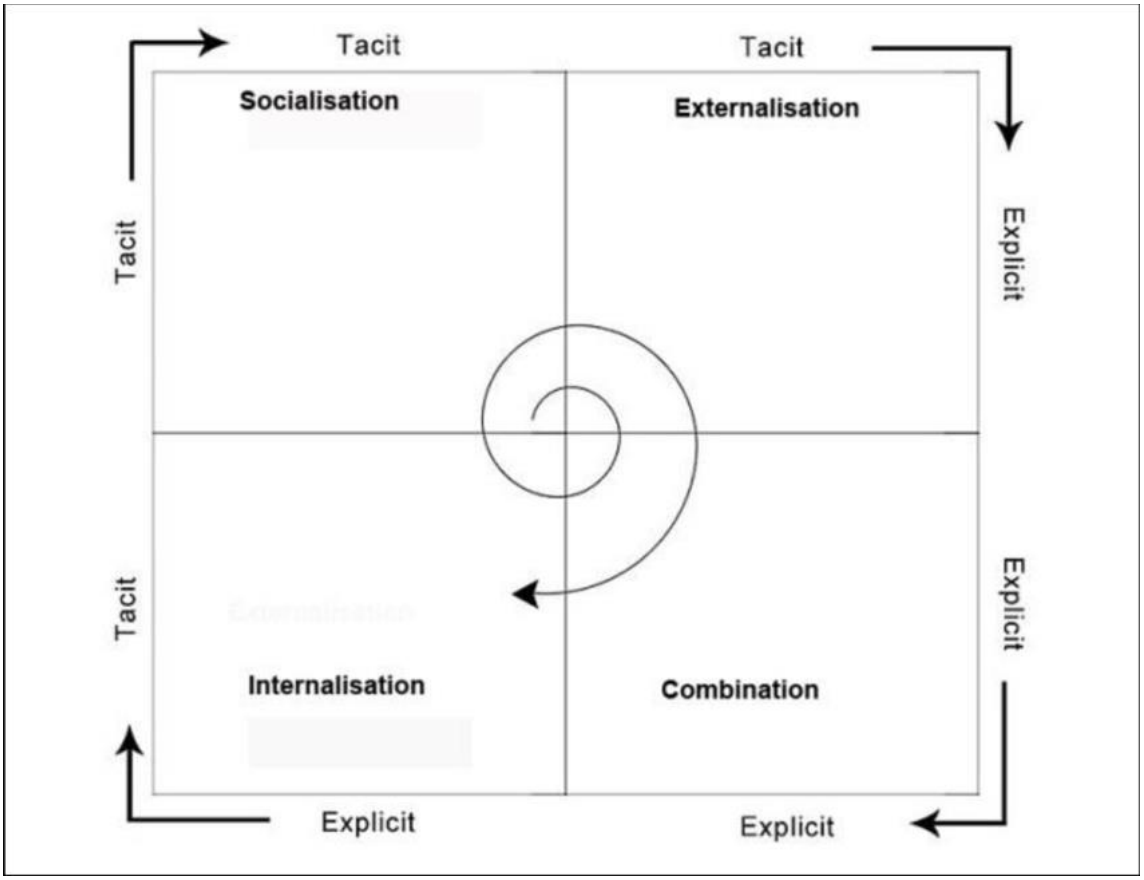
Single-loop learning would also occur when new projects had to be started or when office teams worked in different ways. Some documented their processes clearly, while others did not, or the structure of the teams changed due to members joining or leaving. This indicates that it may be hard to achieve consistent double-loop learning across all areas in a dynamic environment like BYN's.

In addition, Senge's (1990) concept of the learning organization is also relevant to BYN's situation, particularly his discipline of "systems thinking". Senge encourages viewing the organization as an interconnected whole rather than isolated parts, which also aligns with the ANT perspective. Organizational Learning Theory helps to grasp how knowledge loss in one area potentially might affect the entire organization.

Even though double-loop learning is difficult to achieve, BYN had implemented several knowledge repositories that reflect principles from Organizational Learning Theory. For example, they created structured knowledge management tools, such as shared folders in Microsoft Teams, which can be seen as building organizational memory - a repository where important documents, contacts, and project protocols can be stored for future use. This transforms individual know-how into collective knowledge that new staff can access, reducing the NGO's reliance on any single person's memory.

This process aligns with Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) SECI model, which describes how organizations convert tacit knowledge (personal, difficult to formalize) into explicit knowledge (formal, easy to share):

Figure 2: Nonaka's SECI Model adopted from (Nonaka, 1995)



The model also shows how learning happens through everyday interactions and reflection. During my fieldwork, I saw that staff sometimes debriefed after projects and shared lessons learned in team meetings or staff meetings. These practices fit the idea that learning does not just happen by saving files but by talking together about what worked and what did not. Over time, this kind of learning can help small or medium-sized NGOs become more adaptive. One example would be to improve the onboarding process based on feedback from previous interns.

Organizational Learning Theory helps make sense of these efforts, but it also reminds us that storing knowledge is not enough. Schilling and Kluge (2009) point to barriers like lack of time or routines that block learning. This was visible at BYN too. For example, it was an issue that some staff members took documentation more seriously than others. This shows that even with the right tools, knowledge sharing only works if the culture supports it as a normal part of the daily work.

Bringing the Theories Together

By combining these four theoretical perspectives, I was able to understand the different ways BYN staff navigated digital challenges in their daily work. Each theory helped me understand a different part of what was going on at BYN. From how the staff made choices about digital tools to how teams shared knowledge:

Actor Network Theory showed how tools and people shape each other. For example, staff adapted their communication to the layout of Microsoft Teams, and Instagram's algorithm influenced how content was planned.

Boundary Objects Theory helped explain why Microsoft Teams worked well even though teams used it differently. What mattered was that the tool remained flexible and recognizable across the organization.

The Technology Acceptance Model helped me understand why some tools were used while others were not. Staff made decisions based on how useful and easy a tool seemed, depending on their role, skills, and available time.

Organizational Learning Theory made sense of how BYN tries to hold on to knowledge when people leave, and the balance between formal documentation and informal sharing.

Together, these theories helped explain everything from individual choices to organizational practices and the broader relationships between people and technology.

Analysis

Knowledge Management at BYN

One of the biggest challenges I noticed at BYN was how much knowledge disappeared when people left. Organizational Learning Theory (Argote and Miron-Spektor, 2011) helped me make sense of this. Every few months, someone would finish their internship and leave, which meant that both their skills and their understanding of how things worked disappeared. Poul, the leader of the Ukraine team, stressed one of the issues at BYN:

> *"Continuity, continuity, like finding out how, when so many people go in and out, that you continuously build the organization and keep renewing the organization when so much information leaves and so much knowledge leaves and so much effort is put into teaching and learning people new stuff?"* (Poul, 2023).

His answer underlines how staff turnover makes it hard for BYN to maintain long-term learning and improve its ways of working when knowledge is lost.

Documentation Practices and Leadership Approaches

The NGO's response to knowledge continuity challenges varied depending on team leadership and which projects they worked on. These efforts reflect a move from single-loop learning, where problems are solved as they come up, to double-loop learning, where the team rethinks the systems and routines that cause those problems in the first place.

For example, the Microsoft Teams folders maintain enough structures to be recognizable across teams yet remain flexible enough for different groups to use them according to their specific needs. As I noted during fieldwork:

> *"The shared folder structure was interpreted and used differently by each team, some preferring to post pictures as documentation only whereas others would only use text or both, yet it created a common reference point that enabled knowledge sharing despite these variations"* (Field Notes, September 12, 2023).

From an ANT perspective (Latour, 2005), these digital repositories function as influential actants in the organizational network rather than passive storage systems. They translate individual experiences into organizational knowledge, influencing how information flows and how work is conducted. These digital tools actively shape relationships between staff members, creating connections and enabling knowledge transfer that would be impossible without their mediating presence.

However, the effectiveness of these digital systems depended on how individual team leaders chose to implement them. I observed significant differences in knowledge management approaches between different team leaders. As noted in my September 6th observations:

> *"As I have both been part of the Ukrainian team and the school workshop, I could clearly see the difference in ways of leading the team, which clearly highlighted different backgrounds from different BYN-members and the way they wanted to use technologies"* (Field Notes, September 6, 2023).

For instance, Poul, who led the Ukraine project team, *"Stressed the need of documenting meetings, so we were writing summaries of every aspect discussed during a meeting"* (Field Notes, September 6, 2023) and creating a structured record that could be preserved even as team members changed.

In contrast, Anne, who led the school workshop team, took it more relaxed, which is reflected in my notes: *"We just used the computer to look through documents together during the meetings and had rarely preparation for these meetings"* (Field Notes, October 18, 2023).

Despite these different approaches, both teams produced promising outcomes, suggesting that in a small or medium-sized NGO context, there may not be a single "correct" approach to knowledge management. However, the documentation differences between these two teams created uneven knowledge preservation across projects. When I later attempted to find information about methods used in the workshops for the Ukraine team, the project's systematic documentation provided clear guidance, while the school workshop's history remained more fragmented and dependent on verbal explanations from team members, which made it more difficult to stay updated.

The detailed documentation required in the Ukraine team also took up time that I would have preferred to spend on my research. I found myself helping with meeting summaries and follow-up tasks, which pulled me further into the team's daily routines. As mentioned earlier, this made it more difficult to keep the distance I had planned as a researcher. At the same time, being so involved gave me a deeper understanding of how things worked at BYN. I got to see the small decisions, the practical challenges, and the way digital tools were used in real situations. While the structured approach supported continuity of knowledge management, it also blurred the line between being a participant and researcher and limited the time I had for other parts of my fieldwork and thesis in general.

The consequences of these different documentation approaches became evident in day-to-day operations. Field observations confirmed that continuity challenges often affected workflow and slowed down project momentum, when team members had to spend time on finding missing information that had not been stored from the previous meeting for example. Instead of focusing on program development, the staff members often had to find time to transfer knowledge verbally to colleagues.

Knowledge Loss and Informal Networks

While digital documentation systems addressed some continuity challenges, they could not capture the full spectrum of organizational knowledge that existed in informal networks and relationships. In relation to this, the organization's global project coordinator, Sophia, emphasized the importance of documentation:

> *"We need to ensure our work does not disappear when someone leaves. It is frustrating to see how much time we spend reinventing processes that someone else already figured out last year. Our shared drives help, but we need better routines for documenting the why and how, not just final products"* (Sophia, 2023).

These efforts were meant to turn tacit knowledge, such as unspoken experiences and insights, into explicit knowledge that was written down and organized. This reflects what Bridgespan (2016) describes as effective nonprofit knowledge management, which incapsulates collecting, capturing, and sharing the work in ways

that improve organizational continuity and impact. However, because the documentation was not always updated or maintained, the organization still depended heavily on personal interactions to share more detailed or context specific knowledge.

The challenge of capturing informal knowledge was particularly evident in more specialized roles. This issue also showed up in other areas in BYN. Meera, for example, had developed a strong sense of what worked on social media through hands-on experience. Her templates and files were available, but new interns still needed time to develop the same understanding of them.

Knowledge at BYN does not just exist in digital repositories, but in networks of people and relationships that hold the work together. Digital folders can preserve plans and summaries, but they cannot store the informal knowledge that is needed to navigate local systems, build trust with partners, or identify new opportunities. When a key staff member leaves, it may affect how the entire organization functions.

The organization's attempts to address these challenges through formal documentation had mixed results. At BYN, the team compiles a yearly report highlighting projects carried out over the past year, along with key information useful not only for onboarding new team members but also for target groups who might attend events like the Food for Thought dialogue series (which features a range of people such as professors, politicians, activists and journalists or others, who will come and talk about a specific topic and have a dialogue with the audience about it).
In practice, this yearly report is a PDF document containing experiences from previous employees or interns - covering everything from workshop facilitation to managing social media campaigns. However, this was something I had to investigate on my own even before conducting the fieldwork at BYN. Hopefully, this is something that will be introduced to new members who are doing a real internship, as this would smoothen the process of getting familiar with the NGO, and its work.

For these reasons, the challenge of informal knowledge loss remains intact. Many important practices and insights are never documented but instead passed along through on-the-job communication.

This opinion was also underlined by Mathilda, an intern from Italy, who added:

"I think one thing that is very important to work in an NGO, is patience, because sometimes you can do your very best but since we work with so many partners, we rely on outside funding. Sometimes all you can do is have an open-headed mind and be patient and things will fall into place eventually" (Mathilda, 2023).

These perspectives highlight some of the limitations of documentation alone. New staff members often need to navigate unspoken norms and operational shortcuts, from understanding local stakeholder relationships to simply knowing where files are stored in a Microsoft Teams folder.

BYN's mission is especially visible in its work with vulnerable groups, such as young Ukrainian refugees living in Denmark. During my fieldwork with the Ukraine team, I observed how digital tools supported coordination across different people and tasks. The team used platforms like Microsoft Teams and Google Docs to plan activities, share updates, and manage funding proposals. As I noted on September 3, there were *"good vibes and good work by all members"* (Field Notes, September 3, 2023), even while working under pressure.

The project leader, Poul, brought a strong sense of purpose to the work. In a meeting, he explained:

> *"They are being seen only as refugees. They get this refugee identity - working in cafés, not doing what they want. But some of them want to be artists, nurses, students. We want to help make that possible"* (Poul, 2023).

The project aimed not just to offer support but to help young Ukrainians reconnect with their own goals and potential - empowering them, as Poul put it.

Implications for NGO Knowledge Management

Based on this, small and medium-sized NGOs like BYN would benefit from combining digital documentation with structured mentoring, where outgoing and incoming staff work alongside each other while explicitly documenting tacit knowledge. Small and medium-sized organizations might consider implementing "knowledge capture sessions," where team members document not just what they do but why and how they do it, which would be beneficial not only for newcomers but also for the current team members.

Through this combination, small and medium-sized NGOs can strengthen continuity, reduce redundancy, and maintain institutional memory over time, even when employees and interns come and go.

The knowledge management patterns I observed at BYN reveal three important insights about how small NGOs navigate digital transformation.

First, the tension between systematic documentation and flexible work styles is not just about personal preferences. It reflects a deeper challenge about how small organizations balance efficiency with adaptability. Poul's method builds institutional memory that can survive staff turnover, while Anne's approach prioritizes responsiveness and creativity in the moment. Neither approach is wrong, but BYN does not have clear guidelines for when to use which approach, so it depends on whoever happens to be leading each project.

Second, digital tools do not automatically solve knowledge continuity problems, even when they are well-designed and consistently used. The most valuable organizational knowledge often exists in relationships between people, technologies, and practices rather than in any single repository. When these relationships are disrupted by staff turnover, important capabilities can disappear even if the technical information is preserved.

Third, small NGOs face a particular challenge because they depend on both stability and flexibility to keep going. They need enough organizational memory to build on past work while also being able to adapt to new situations and changing opportunities. To strike that balance, it is important to understand which types of knowledge that should be stored in formal systems and which types that can stay informal without destabilizing organizational continuity.

Digital Tools for Youth Engagement

BYN's approach to digital outreach is essentially about building communities. The NGO uses technology both to disseminate information but also to create genuine connections among participants. By doing this, the NGO aims to transform passive target groups into active communities of young change makers that potentially will have the ability to continue the communities that BYN have helped establish in the first place, which reinforces the NGO's mission and might attract other individuals who want to create similar communities. In addition to this, BYN cultivates several overlapping types of communities externally: a global community of young activists united by shared values and goals and local communities of youth participants in specific regions or countries.

Internally, it opens the possibility of community between staff, interns, volunteers and partners across geographical boundaries.

Platform Strategy and Community Building

The theoretical foundation for BYN's digital community-building approach is rooted in understanding technology as an empowerment tool for youth activism. This perspective is reinforced by Shengelia, an intern from Georgia, who emphasized how technology empowers youth globally:

> *"Technology is a powerful tool for empowering young people around the world, making them change makers. It provides access to information, enables global collaboration, and amplifies their voices"* (Shengelia, 2023).

With a bachelor's degree in international relations and working as a journalist in Tbilisi, Shengelia joined BYN to gain hands-on experience in NGO work. He is particularly interested in peace-building and intercultural

communication. For example, his journalistic competences were put to use at BYN by writing summaries of events that would then be posted to the webpage.

His statement summarizes BYN's rationale for investing in digital outreach: online platforms allow the organization to reach young volunteers and the broader youth audience, which may enhance engagement with global issues despite geographical distances and cultural differences. This approach aligns with recent research showing that European youth increasingly use digital platforms not only for entertainment, but also as spaces for civic participation and identity expression (Tsouparopoulou et al., 2025; Third et al., 2017).

The organization's platform selection and adoption patterns can be understood through TAM. In this relation, TAM helps to explain why certain digital platforms have been successfully adopted for community building. As touched upon earlier, social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook have high perceived usefulness (effectively reaching target audiences) and high perceived ease of use (staff familiarity), which leads to organizational adoption - those that staff find intuitive and clearly beneficial have a greater chance of being integrated into daily operations. This underscores why BYN consistently invested time in maintaining these digital channels, while one staff member also shared her thoughts about adapting TikTok as well to reach even more young people (Field Notes, October 15, 2023).

Outreach through social media has proven to be a critical tool in BYN's outreach strategy, as Shengelia further shared:

> *"Social media platforms are particularly important in terms of reaching a wider audience and engaging young people in discussions about global issues. Social media makes it easier to make connections and spread the message, which is crucial. It also helps people collaborate around the world. So, in my opinion, social media platforms are a primary tool for reaching and empowering diverse groups"* (Shengelia, 2023).

By utilizing platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, BYN meets their target groups, where they already are. This is especially relevant in the Danish context, where up to 98% of young people aged 16-29 are active on social media platforms (Eurostat, 2024), which demonstrates the logic behind BYN's platform choices. Social media posts allow the NGO to present its messaging in youth-friendly formats-short videos, visual stories, and relatable graphics-that aims to capture attention from young people scrolling through feeds. The team noted that today's youth prefer concise, visually engaging content (Field Notes, October 17, 2023). This claim is supported by recent research showing that Instagram's visual features strongly influence how users see and interact with content (Kallio and Mäenpää, 2025).

BYN shows an understanding of diverse communication preferences among young people, which is further emphasized by Anne, who describes this multi-channel approach:

> *"All of the platforms are really efficient to disseminate information. If you put this information on a lot of platforms, then people can have access. For example, if you are interested in podcasts, you can listen to a podcast - if you are interested in reading a blog post, you can read the blog post"* (Anne, 2023).

BYN shared the same core messages across different platforms because they knew young people use technology in different ways. Some followed Instagram stories, others listened to podcasts, and a few still read blog posts. This approach took extra effort from the staff, but it also gave them useful feedback about what worked, as many platforms offer analytical data and real-time responses that may help BYN understand what resonates with its audience. Thus, they were able to see which formats had a greater chance of reaching people and could adjust their outreach strategy based on that.
The organization has the possibility to track metrics like video views, post shares, and comment activity to evaluate which topics or formats capture most interest. These data-driven insights allow continuous refinement of content and approach. For instance, if short Instagram reels gain high engagement, more effort might be allocated to that medium, and if a detailed blog article has less traffic, its key points might be changed into a more edible video or graphic (Kallio and Mäenpää, 2025).

Moreover, these improvements can be seen as double loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978). Instead of just fixing low engagement by adjusting content, BYN can use analytics to question and rethink which formats work best for different messages, and why.

Finally, ANT allows the platforms to be seen as actants themselves in the process. Their algorithms, design, and technical limits influence how BYN engages with its audience and how young people respond. As Shengelia (2023) noted, these tools *"enable [young people] to engage in dialogue and collaboration".*

Digital Divides and Hybrid Approaches

Meanwhile, BYN should remain mindful about the fact that not all young people have equal access to these technologies. The digital divide means that younger people in lower-income regions or rural areas may lack access to smartphones or reliable internet connection. Some of the staff members recognized this issue during our interviews, as they stressed the need for a hybrid approach to also reach those who do not have access to digital information. This concern is captured by Raj, a BYN intern from Nepal, as he responded:

> *"Yeah, you know, the people who have access to these technologies become more powerful, because they have easy access to information and resources. But those who do not have*

> *smartphones or internet access still lack the information they need to grow or develop, so they might fall behind. So, when developing programs to empower young people, these things really need to be considered"* (Raj, 2023).

Raj holds a master's degree in development and migration from Roskilde University and has worked with youth, refugee, and human rights issues both in Nepal and in Denmark. Having seen firsthand how scarce resources and limited access to technology can affect young people in rural areas, he brings valuable insight into the issue regarding outreach approaches.

This underlines how digital youth outreach can include some groups while leaving others out (Vermeire and Van den Broeck, 2024). Young people who use Instagram will often be notified about events and projects, while others who prefer different platforms or simply are offline may never find out. This kind of digital divide is not only about access to devices or the internet. It also involves preferences, digital skills, and cultural ways of communicating, which can differ a lot between youth communities. BYN must constantly navigate these differences while trying to make the most of the resources they have.

Discussion of Youth Engagement Findings

BYN's digital tools for youth engagement reveal important patterns about how small organizations use technology to reach and connect young people across cultural and geographic boundaries. These patterns extend beyond technological adoption by showing how digital youth work requires ongoing negotiation between technological possibilities and organizational values.

These insights suggest that ideal digital outreach for small NGOs means seeing technology as a tool for building relationships, not just to spread information. It takes careful planning to create specific communication strategies, while also making sure that the main mission and real human connection stay at the center of the work.

BYN's use of social media shows a kind of "platform literacy", meaning that staff understood more than just how to use the tools. They also understood how each platform shaped the way communication and relationship-building could happen, reflecting what Plantin et al. (2018) platform-specific affordances that shape user behavior. Staff members did not simply post the same content across all platforms and hoped people would respond. Instead, they adjusted their messages, visual style, and ways of interacting to match the specific features and expectations of each platform. On Instagram, the focus was on strong visuals and emotional connection through graphics and short videos. On Facebook, the team focused more on sharing detailed information and using event features to support community building.

In addition, TAM helps explain why certain digital tools became central to BYN's work with youth, while others were quickly set aside. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook were seen as highly useful because they gave staff direct access to the youth audience they wanted to reach. They were also easy to use, partly because staff already knew how they worked from personal use. On the other hand, digital platforms that were made specifically for youth engagement were set aside such as Discord, which Banson and Hardin (2022) used to assess student participation. This was not because they lacked useful features, but because they took too much time to learn, which was difficult since staff often changed. This shows how small and medium-sized NGOs like BYN may adopt outreach strategies based on what is practical and straightforward instead of something that may be more efficient.

From an ANT perspective, it is interesting to look at how social media algorithms act as non-human participants in shaping how outreach happens. These algorithms influence what will be seen, when, and by whom, often without staff or audiences noticing. For example, Instagram's focus on visual content led BYN to invest more time in graphic design and video materials. Facebook's event features shaped how the team planned and promoted community activities. These effects reflect what ANT calls technological agency, where tools influence human behavior without direct decisions being made (Latour, 2005).

BYN's use of different platforms also shows how digital youth engagement works ideally for them, when there is a balance between reaching a large audience and building real relationships. Social media helps to get attention, but deeper engagement still depends on human interaction, cultural awareness, and ongoing efforts that technology cannot replace.

Building Cross-Cultural Communities Through Technology

Inside BYN, different digital communication platforms play specific roles in internal community building. Tools like Microsoft Teams chat and Trello boards act as informal spaces where staff can share both work-related materials and more personal updates. When new staff members join BYN, they are added to these digital spaces, where they can begin to follow the interactions, learn how the organization works, and gradually become more involved.

However, these processes do not only happen digitally but require careful integration of both online and offline collaboration elements.

Hybrid Spaces and Technological Infrastructure

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed how BYN integrated online and offline environments to create optimal environments for collaboration. The physical and digital spaces at BYN often blend, creating what ANT would

describe as hybrid environments (Tsvetkova et al., 2015). The picture below shows "The Glass Room," which can be viewed as a boundary object.

The Glass Room

During my fieldwork, I observed how this room supported interactions - between staff members, a group of Spanish teachers who wanted to know more about the NGO's work, and teams from the other NGOs at the office. In this hybrid environment, it was possible to gather around a table while remote participants joined via the projector that was connected to a large screen, creating a seamless blend of physical and virtual presence (Field notes, October 26, 2023).

The Glass Room exemplifies the characteristics a boundary object: it maintained a common identity (a space for collaboration) while being interpreted differently by each group according to their specific needs.
This room had more digital connectivity compared to the office, as it was possible to do online-meetings with partners for a whole team using the projector and web-camera for example while having a quiet space away from the potential noise from the office.

Additionally, the Glass Room can be seen as what ANT scholars like Latour (1987) describe as a “black box” - a technology that works reliably in the background, even if users do not fully understand how it functions. This includes its technological infrastructure, such as the internet connection, audio-visual equipment, and video conferencing software. Staff members simply enter the room, connect their devices, and participate in virtual meetings, trusting that the technology will work as expected and support collaboration without needing to think about technicalities.

International Collaboration and Digital Coordination

One of the projects I took part in proved how digital outreach enables community building across great distances. The NGO's leader, the Global Project Coordinator, and I collaborated with a think tank in Armenia to support youth displaced by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Davtyan, 2023). We held a series of Zoom meetings in the Glass Room to co-design an evening school program for these displaced teenagers in the Syunik region of southern Armenia. This is according to the thinktank’s leader a poor region, which is emphasized through the EU’s “Resilient Syunik” initiative (European Union, 2024), where several EU countries have donated Armenia 65 million euros and given them a loan of 85 million to support development and positive change in the region.

The workshops were designed to provide education, form new social bonds, while also offering psychological support, a meal and a sense of normalcy for the youth. All coordination occurred digitally: over a couple of months, the Danish and Armenian team met weekly via video calls and worked together on shared Google Docs to develop lesson plans and materials.

From an ANT perspective (Latour, 2005), the digital tools in this project served as actants, enabling the translation of goals and ideas between geographically distant teams. The shared Google Docs and Zoom meetings were not passive channels but active actants that shaped how the project evolved.

Through frequent virtual meetings, collaborative planning, and mutual respect, the think tank's instructors eventually assembled a local team to teach evening classes for teenagers in Syunik. The young participants not only gained new knowledge but also formed strong connections with one another. Some stayed after class to chat and share meals, supported by local organizers. This experience showed how digital outreach can connect communities by bringing people together - in this case, youth who really needed it due to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, BYN’s approach to cross-cultural collaboration is enriched by the diversity within its own organizational structure according to Sophia, BYN’s global coordinator, as she reflected:

> *"I think it is very special that we have an office team, that is usually very diverse with, say, 20 people from 20 countries. Some people may be meeting and working with people from other cultures for the first time"* (Sophia, 2023).

Originally from Serbia, Sophia has spent over 15 years working in international youth and peace-building projects. With an academic background in anthropology, she emphasizes the importance of intercultural dialogue and collective empowerment in all her work. This internal diversity might be beneficial for global collaboration, where team members develop cross-cultural competencies through daily interactions. These competences then translate into external partnerships, as Sophia further explains:

"Then at our events, Food for Thought and many other events and projects, we connect with local partners. Just some months ago, when we had a visit from our partner from Ukraine, and from Nigeria - they are working as local NGOs, but totally in a different context. And that is incredible, because we can co-create something even if they come from totally different regions and face different challenges" (Sophia, 2023).

Sophia highlights how these cultural differences can be seen as strengths when dealing with issues together by combining diverse perspectives or approaches to a problem.
In other words, digital tools have been crucial for cross-border collaboration beyond the Armenian project. Through Zoom or Microsoft Teams for example, online communication has enabled youth from different countries to work together effectively in a range of projects that BYN has committed to. Raj described a research project where meeting in person was difficult:

> *"I was doing research with my teams, my friends, about migrant workers in Copenhagen or something, but it was very hard to meet all of us together and even the respondents, so we use like phone and like other medium, technological medium, to collect data - and you know, even to even to write and even to discuss our ideas"* (Raj, 2023).

His experience underlines that young people can organize, plan and collaborate even when separated by geography through online means. BYN uses tools like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and shared document platforms to connect with partners across borders daily, binding the organization's remote members into a structured working community. Julia, project coordinator, reflected on these online meetings, which she argued had increased due to the COVID pandemic, which aligns with research on post-pandemic digital collaboration patterns (Kniffin et al., 2021):

> *"[...] after COVID the concept... has changed. Now we meet in Teams, we meet on social media, people become closer... technology is playing a part in building... new formations, bringing people together and sharing ideas"* (Julia, 2023).

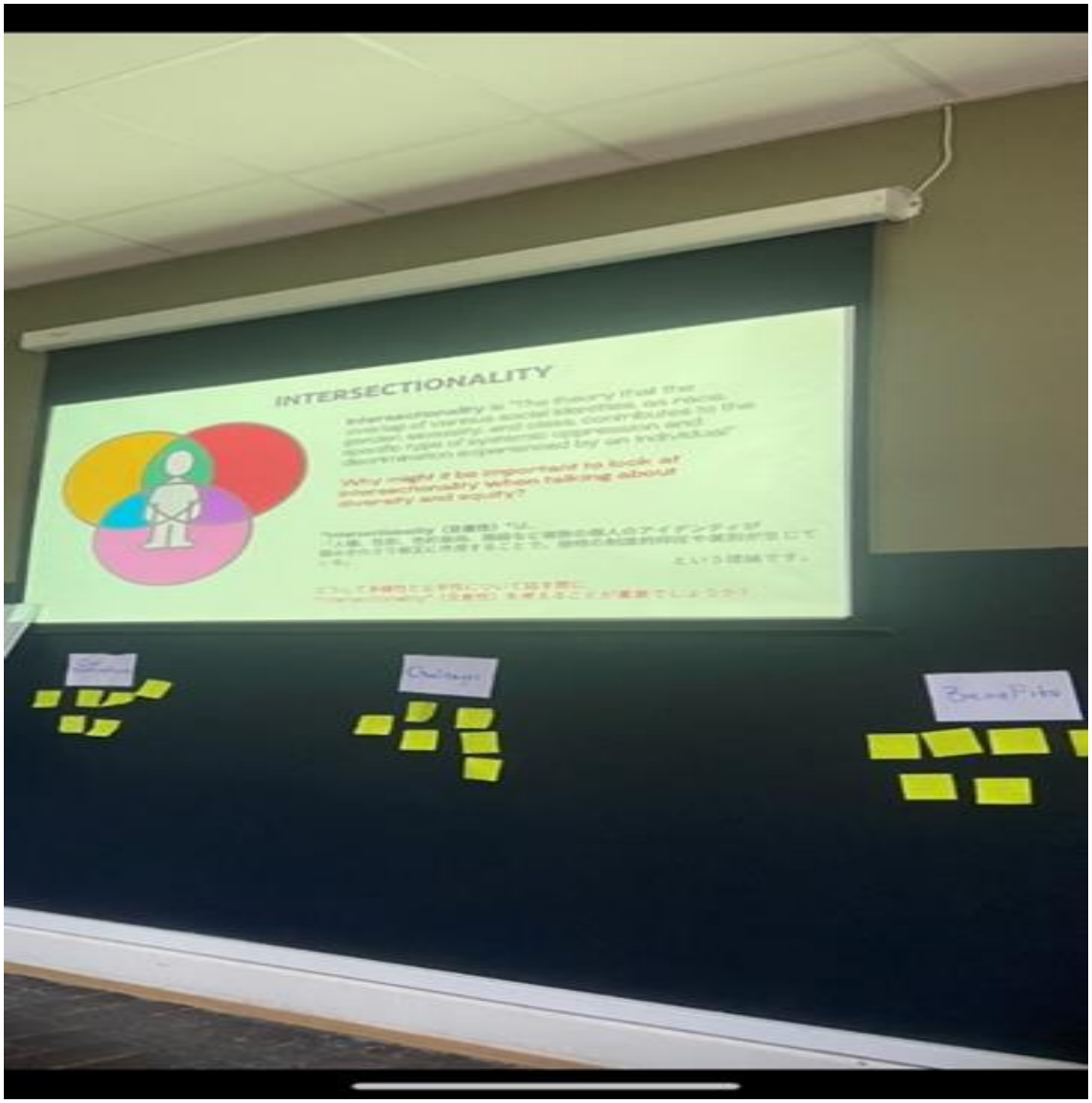
What she calls "new formations" are the relationships and communities that emerge when interactions move online. Young people who might never have met in person can form bonds through virtual exchanges facilitated by BYN. These bonds may improve cross-cultural understanding and solidarity, which reinforces the NGO's goals of empowering young people.

Cultural Adaptation and Digital Communication Tools

BYN's creative approaches to cross-cultural communication through digital means were exemplified in a workshop I observed on September 14th, 2023. The event brought together Japanese students and local participants to explore the concept of diversity. The leader opened the session by stating, "*We are all here to find answers together*" (Field notes, September 14, 2023), aiming to establish a collaborative atmosphere rather than instructional.

What made this session particularly effective was the thoughtful integration of digital and interpersonal elements. The PowerPoint presentation included bilingual slides in both English and Japanese, ensuring all participants could participate regardless of language proficiency (Adhani and Remijn, 2024), as I noted: *"On the PowerPoint there were slides written in both English and Japanese, so everyone understood*" (Field notes, September 14, 2023).

The Bilingual PowerPoint Slide



This PowerPoint slide is another example of how technology can act as a boundary object, in this case supporting meaningful interaction across both language and cultural differences.

These bilingual slides reflect all four key traits of effective boundary objects. First, they kept a clear identity across different settings by showing the same content in both languages. Second, they were flexible enough to meet local needs by addressing the language preferences of different participants. Third, they were strong enough to stay consistent across groups, with the same visual content shown no matter which language was being read. Fourth, they met the information needs of people from different backgrounds by giving equal access to the content.

For the Japanese participants, having information in their own language lowered the barriers to understanding complex ideas. For the staff of BYN, the bilingual format showed their intention of being inclusive.
Even though the workshop included people with different cultural backgrounds and different levels of experience with the topic, the PowerPoint show helped to create a shared point of reference that allowed the participants to have a productive and inclusive discussion.

Discussion of Cross-Cultural Collaboration

Throughout this section, I have examined BYN's approach to cross-cultural collaboration. The organization recognizes that effective youth engagement often requires meeting young people in digital spaces and speaking their language. Smartphones and social media have become essential to reach youth communities, which is reflected in how BYN uses these channels creatively and inclusively.

BYN approaches digital outreach as a continuous exchange, where listening to youth feedback is as important as delivering messages. This empowers young people to shape the conversation, not just receive information. The outcomes appear both online and offline: connections might begin in a Facebook thread or Zoom call, then translate into real-world projects and friendships.

By using digital tools as boundary objects, such as bilingual PowerPoint slides and hybrid meeting spaces like the Glass Room, BYN manages to bridge geographical, linguistic, and cultural differences. These tools help the organization carry out its mission of promoting cross cultural dialogue and supporting youth in becoming active global citizens, even when facing limited resources and frequent staff changes.

Looking at how BYN uses technology to build cross-cultural communities shows both the strengths and weaknesses of digital tools in supporting intercultural dialogue and cooperation. Digital tools can help to create meaningful connections across cultural boundaries, but still require ongoing attention to power relations, cultural understanding and especially human involvement, as stressed by Dooly and Darvin (2022), who argue that online communication can also reinforce exclusion and inequality if people are not mindful about how they use it.

The collaboration with Armenian partners shows how digital tools can help coordinate projects across large distances, but also how they require cultural translation work that goes beyond simple language differences. Shared Google Docs and Zoom meetings were not just neutral tools for sharing information. They can be viewed as actants that partly determine the different ways of doing youth work and planning projects through their interface. This kind of digital collaboration shows that boundary objects are not only used for

coordination, but also become spaces where different cultural practices meet, influence one another, and sometimes lead to new shared ways of doing work (Chang and Kuo, 2021).

At the same time, challenges from the Ukrainian refugee workshops showed that digital preferences and communication habits vary widely across cultures. These differences can lead to unintended exclusion, even when intentions are good. For example, when it became clear that many young Ukrainians preferred Telegram instead of Facebook, this was not just about personal choice. It reflected deeper cultural attitudes toward digital platforms, different views on privacy and safety, and communication styles shaped by political and social experiences. This indicates that digital outreach across cultures and geographical distances requires attention to how different groups use technology instead of assuming that one platform fits all.

Overall, the analysis shows that using digital tools across cultures involves dealing with several considerations at the same time. These include language, culture, technology access, age, and organizational structure. What made BYN successful in building cross-cultural communities was their ability to create digital tools and spaces that worked across these boundaries, while still being flexible enough to adapt to local needs and changing situations.

These findings suggest that digital tools may help to bridge cultural gaps, but only if they are used with a deeper understanding of the context. Digital tools do not replace the need for intercultural skills. Instead, they make those skills even more important. For NGOs doing cross-cultural work, this means building both technical knowledge and cultural awareness.

Technology Constraints and Digital Inequality

While technology enables many innovations in BYN's work, the organization operates within constraints that reveal broader patterns of digital inequality affecting both internal operations and external engagement.

Unlike larger NGOs with dedicated IT budgets and standardized equipment, BYN must constantly negotiate between technological possibilities and practical constraints. This process reveals how they must develop innovative solutions while simultaneously being at risk of increasing inequality and vulnerability, if things do not go as planned.

Understanding these resource constraints provides crucial insights into how digital inequality operates not just between organizations, but within them, affecting daily operations, staff dynamics, and the communities they aim to serve (Robinson et al., 2020).

Internal Digital Divides

While technology enables many innovations in BYN's work, the staff members still face constraints when it comes to technological capabilities, which is partly due to budget limitations. Material access presents a particular challenge. As I observed during fieldwork, resource constraints visibly shaped daily technology use. The most apparent issue was equipment limitations, which created an implicit inequality rarely considered in office settings, as Julia explained:

> *"We work digitally, so you need to have a laptop; but the NGO does not provide one, so everyone brings their own. Obviously, that does not create equality between employees because some people have better technology than others"* (Julia, 2023).

Everyone brought their own laptop to work because the organization could not afford to provide computers. This meant that some people had powerful machines while others struggled with old, slow laptops that made their work frustrating and inefficient. These differences affected productivity and caused an internal digital divide - a hierarchy unrelated to job titles or skills but based purely on access to better digital equipment (Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023).

From an ANT perspective (Latour, 2005), personal devices and software subscriptions became important actants within BYN's organizational network. The different capabilities of staff members' laptops, smartphones, and tools such as Canva shaped how collaboration took place at BYN. In many cases, these personal devices made things possible that the organization itself could not provide. However, this also increased inequality among staff members and may have affected processes that were often invisible but important for BYN's day-to-day operation (Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023).

Resource Constraints and Creative Solutions

Software and digital services presented a recurring challenge. These tools were crucial in allowing the NGO to operate professionally without acquiring expensive software.

These free tools were adopted because they seemed useful related to their cost (zero) and were perceived as being easy to use. More advanced paid alternatives might have provided additional features, but the cost- the organization's tight budget meant that free options were favored, despite their limitations.

In this relation, Meera explained how many tools she used in her daily work:

> *"I think I am the one who uses [technology] the most because I lead the graphics and web design. So, I work with all kinds of software right from Adobe Suite to Canva to WordPress, and other tools that helped me stay organized. I design, manage and maintain the WordPress website for Borderless Youth Network and its related projects. To stay organized, I like using*

> *the tools provided by Microsoft, like to do lists, daily reminders, Teams to organize my files"* (Meera, 2023).

Many staff members did not have the same range of digital tools as Meera. This is where the limits of free digital tools become clear. For example, when a high-quality layout was needed for the annual report, Meera used her personal Adobe Illustrator subscription to complete the task. In doing so, she effectively donated access to her own paid software. This kind of informal resource support was common at BYN. Staff members often made use of personal software or equipment to fill the gaps left by the NGO's limited digital infrastructure.

The upside of this approach was that it fostered innovation and solidarity. The team constantly scouted for free or low-cost tech solutions and learned new open-source software. Everyone understood the challenges, creating a strong ethos of sharing and mutual support. When someone discovered a useful free app or obtained a donated service, they immediately shared it with colleagues.

The downside, however, is that this approach brings uncertainty and inconsistency. If a key staff member with a paid software subscription left the organization, that capability would leave with them. This connects back to the earlier point about continuity challenges. When an organization depends heavily on personal devices and individual know-how, staff turnover can quickly reduce its overall digital capacity (Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023). Much of what keeps things running smoothly exists outside formal systems, which makes the NGO vulnerable when people leave.

Reaching Target Groups

The digital inequality BYN faced was not just internal but also affected engagement with partners and the broader community. Not everyone in the target groups had the required digital literacy or level of English, which created challenges for outreach (Fricke et al., 2024). This became especially clear during projects supporting Ukrainian refugees in Denmark.

The team had to adapt both digital outreach and communication methods to account for language and platform barriers like in the workshop on diversity. During one of the first in-person workshops for Ukrainian refugees, designed to help newly arrived young people build community, we sent invitations in English, Ukrainian, and Danish using Facebook, email, and printed flyers. Despite this effort, we discovered that many young Ukrainians relied more on Telegram than Facebook or email for communication. This preference is supported by a 2024 survey showing that 90.5% of Ukrainian youth aged 18-29 use Telegram for news, while only 23% use Facebook (Civil Network OPORA, 2024). This mismatch meant some messages went unseen, and participants suggested using Telegram for easier updates.

Some of the Ukrainians who replied to our invitations seemed unfamiliar with certain digital processes, such as completing online registration forms or joining Facebook groups for updates or simply struggled with English language, which excluded them as potential participants.
Even during the workshop itself, language occasionally became a barrier. Some participants started to speak Ukrainian, making cross-group discussion challenging when facilitators lacked a common language.
These experiences highlight the need to have a flexible approach in relation to both language and platform selection based on target group preferences.

TAM helps to explain why certain platforms are preferred by different user groups. Young Ukrainians found Telegram to have higher perceived usefulness and ease of use compared to Facebook or email, based on their prior experience and communication norms. Understanding these preferences proved crucial for effective outreach.

Peter, the intern from Romania, reflected upon this in our interview:

> *"I think it depends on which target you want to reach. I think digitally is maybe better when you want to reach a lot of people. But if you want to create more connection with people, I think it is better to use methods like going on the street and giving out flyers because there you can really show yourself, your personality, and people can connect with what you are saying and your principles. So, I think both can complement each other*" (Peter, 2023).

In Peter's view, online methods are excellent for broad outreach, whereas face-to-face methods build deeper connections - and a combination is ideal, according to him.

BYN's workshops on digital literacy for Danish boarding school students also showed a practical and hands-on way of using technology. As I noted in my field notes, “BYN taught young people how to recognize fake news, as mentioned earlier, and even how to create examples themselves” (Field Notes, September 14, 2023). In one session with the students, the team combined a PowerPoint show with group activities and discussions, where most of the young people reacted positively to the interactive format and made a great effort in the exercises. The students created all kinds of fake news, one more hilarious than the other. This showed that BYN's blended approach helped to keep the 14- to 16-year-old students engaged and made the learning experience more interactive and interesting for them.

Discussion of Technology Constraints

The NGO's approach to technology ultimately mirrors its approach to its mission, which is to find ways to connect people and build bridges across differences - even when resources are limited.

The analysis of BYN's technology constraints reveals important patterns about how resource limitations shape both internal operations and external engagement strategies in small organizations, which is also highlighted by Godefroid et al. (2023), who describe how smaller NGOs often struggle to adopt and sustain digital tools due to limited financial, human, and technical resources. This results in fragmented communication practices and a reliance on improvised solutions; challenges that BYN also experienced.

What stood out to me about BYN's social media strategy was how well the team understood that each platform functions differently. Instagram required visual content that could catch attention quickly, while Facebook events called for more detailed information and features that supported discussion. The staff clearly recognized that posting the same content across platforms would not work. Each platform needed its own specific approach. Staff members adapted their messaging, visual design, and interaction style to fit the target groups of each platform, which shows a reflected and practical understanding of how technology shapes communication.

TAM helps explain why some digital tools became central to BYN's outreach, while others were quickly left behind. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook were seen as highly useful because they offered direct access to youth who were already active users. They were also easy to use because staff members were already familiar with them through personal experience. In contrast, more specialized youth engagement platforms were often avoided, not because they lacked important features, but because they required too much time and training in an environment with high staff turnover. This shows that small NGOs tend to adopt tools based on what is practical, not based on formal assessments.

From an ANT perspective, it becomes even more interesting to look at how social media algorithms function as non-human actors that shape communication strategies in ways that are often hidden. Instagram's focus on visual content encouraged BYN to prioritize graphic design and video production, while Facebook's event tools guided how activities were structured and promoted. These subtle but powerful effects are examples of what ANT calls technological agency, where non-human actors influence outcomes without direct human decisions. For small and medium-sized NGOs, being aware of these platform dynamics is essential for staying aligned with their mission while navigating the constraints of digital systems.

The most substantial insight from analyzing technology constraints at BYN is how resource limitations can drive innovation and create vulnerability at the same time. BYN's use of multiple platforms also shows that reaching and engaging with young people often requires more than a digital approach. Social media gives quick access to large audiences, but real engagement still depends on human relationships, cultural understanding, and ongoing dialogue. The most successful initiatives at BYN combined online outreach with

in-person activities. These hybrid engagement strategies used digital tools to start conversations, while face-to-face meetings supported trust and helped to deepen connection among participants over time.

At the same time, the analysis reveals how digital constraints can create both internal inequalities and external exclusions. Staff members with better personal devices had advantages in productivity and task allocation, while target groups with limited platform access or digital literacy faced barriers to participation. These digital divides go beyond simple access issues to include platform preferences, cultural communication styles, and varying levels of technological familiarity.

Together, these insights show that effective digital youth engagement in small NGOs depends on treating technology as a tool for building relationships. Success for BYN comes from developing communication strategies that are specific to each target group, while staying focused on meaningful connections, and the organization's core values and mission across different contexts.

Conclusion

After spending three months at BYN, I came to see that digital transformation in small NGOs is less about the tools themselves and more about how people actually use them in everyday work. There was often a clear gap between what the organization planned to do with digital tools and what actually happened. In practice, things often ran through creative ideas and improvised solutions, shaped by limited resources and which individuals who were at the office.

My fieldwork revealed four key areas where digital tools mattered most: how BYN managed knowledge despite constant staff turnover, how they used social media to reach young people, how technology helped bridge cultural differences in international partnerships, and how limited resources created both creative solutions and new inequalities. What became clear is that successful digital adoption depends less on having the right technology and more on having people who can adapt tools to fit changing circumstances.

What I learned from BYN shows how complicated digital transformation is for small NGOs. To succeed in this regard is not just about having the right technology - it is about how people adapt these tools to fit their specific situations and relationships, which will be further elaborated in the coming.

Key Findings

What I observed at BYN challenges the typical story about digital transformation. Instead of following a clear plan or strategy, the organization was constantly navigating between what technology could offer, what they needed, and what staff could realistically handle. Rather than the linear adoption models described in the literature (Mergel et al., 2019), BYN took a more pragmatic and experimental approach. The office team

blended digital tools with existing ways of working, creating hybrid solutions that reflected both the potential and the limits they were dealing with.

One of the clearest examples of this came from observing how the same digital tool could function in very different ways within the same organization. Microsoft Teams, for instance, was used as a structured documentation space for the Ukraine team, but it acted more like a quick coordination tool for the school workshop team. This shows how boundary objects theory applies in practice (Star and Griesemer, 1989): digital tools can adapt to different working styles while still providing a shared framework that supports collaboration and coherence across the organization.

Another key insight from my fieldwork is that knowledge in small NGOs does not only live in documents or databases. It is embedded in relationships, routines, and informal systems. When a staff member leaves, they take with them more than just their skills. This challenges common ideas about digital knowledge management and supports the view that organizational learning is deeply social (Brown and Duguid, 2001).

Digital inequality affected BYN at multiple levels (van Dijk, 2020). Internally, staff had unequal access to tools based on their personal resources. Externally, young people had different levels of access depending on internet, language, and platform familiarity. Cultural variation further influenced communication norms and platform use across different communities. These overlapping forms of inequality cannot be addressed by simply offering access to devices or platforms. They require more context-sensitive and thoughtful responses.

Finally, my study highlights the importance of recognizing algorithmic agency in shaping NGO practices (Latour, 2005). Social media algorithms influenced what kind of content BYN produced and how it was framed. Platform features affected how events were created, how people engaged, and how success was measured. These invisible, underlying technological processes can steer organizations in subtle ways. Understanding and reflecting on them is crucial for small NGOs that want to stay mission-focused while adapting to the demands of digital environments (Gillespie, 2014).

Theoretical Contributions

By analyzing the NGO through four different theoretical lenses, I was able to discover socio-technical insights that might have remained invisible if I had only relied on a single framework. Each theory focused on different dimensions of how small and medium-sized NGOs engage with digital tools, from everyday practices to organizational structures and broader social dynamics. In this way, the study contributes to existing theory by showing the value of a multi-theoretical approach for analyzing digital practices in organizational resource-constrained settings.

Actor-Network Theory Contributions

ANT helped me see how BYN's network kept shifting as people joined or left. Each change meant the network had to reorganize, not just socially but also in terms of the competences that disappeared when someone left. In those moments, nonhuman actants like shared folders or digital platforms sometimes helped hold things together when key relationships and skills were lost. Tools like shared folders in Microsoft Teams became stabilizing actors in an otherwise shifting landscape. At the same time, the informal and relationship-based culture of small NGOs allowed for rapid adaptation when disruptions occurred.

In addition, the thesis highlights that translation processes in small NGOs frequently rely on improvisation and adaptation rather than formal planning. The successful use of new digital tools depends less on strategic decisions and more on the ability of individual staff members to navigate between the possibilities offered by the technology and the practical needs of the organization.

Boundary objects Theory Contributions

This research contributes to boundary objects theory (Star & Griesemer, 1989) by demonstrating how the same artifact can simultaneously succeed as a boundary object in some contexts while failing to coordinate effectively in others within the same organization. My analysis underscores that tools do not function as boundary objects on their own but become meaningful through use in specific contexts.

This study also extends Star and Griesemer's framework by demonstrating how boundary objects can operate across several types of boundaries at the same time. These include disciplinary, professional, cultural, linguistic, technological, and generational boundaries. The bilingual PowerPoint slides and hybrid meeting spaces such as the Glass Room serve as examples of how effective boundary objects in multicultural NGO settings must navigate the intersection of many kinds of difference.

In addition, the research highlights how boundary objects require continuous maintenance and integration to remain useful. In resource-constrained organizations, this work often becomes invisible and depends heavily on individual initiative rather than formal structures. As a result, the long-term sustainability of coordination tools may be at risk, especially when key staff leave, or organizational routines change.

Technology Acceptance Model Contributions

This thesis aims to bring new insight to TAM (Davis, 1989) by showing how resource limitations reshape technology adoption in small NGOs. In these settings, the cost of digital tools becomes central to how usefulness is perceived, often leading to systematic preferences for free platforms even when paid alternatives offer better functionality. This builds on findings by Saxton et al. (2010) and highlights how financial constraints influence the everyday choices nonprofits make.

The research also shows that technology acceptance in mission-driven organizations follows a different logic than in profit-oriented businesses. At BYN, staff were more likely to adopt tools that directly supported the organization's social goals, even when those tools came with a learning curve. This suggests that mission alignment may act as an added factor in nonprofit technology adoption.

Furthermore, perceived ease of use takes on greater weight in environments with limited technical support and frequent staff changes (Hackler and Saxton, 2007). In this context, the preference for familiar platforms reflects a practical response to internal limitations, rather than a resistance to change.

Organizational Learning Theory Contributions

In studying BYN, I observed how small organizations often face challenges in turning everyday knowledge into something that can be shared, stored, or transferred. This aligns with key ideas from Organizational Learning Theory (Argote and Miron-Spektor, 2011) but also reveals the limits of formal knowledge management in resource-constrained settings. My analysis shows that much of the most valuable knowledge in small NGOs exists in relationships, routines, and lived experiences that are difficult to capture through digital tools alone. This highlights the need for approaches that combine technological systems with social practices to support learning and continuity. These findings build on and adapt Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) SECI model by showing how knowledge creation and sharing must be rethought in contexts with limited infrastructure and high staff turnover.

My study also extends understanding of single-loop versus double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978) by showing how resource constraints often prevent small organizations from engaging in the reflective processes necessary for double-loop learning, even when they recognize the need for systemic improvements. This creates recurring patterns where organizations repeatedly address symptoms rather than the underlying causes.

Practical Implications: Insights for Similar Organizations

The things I learned during this research could be useful for other small and medium-sized NGOs dealing with digital challenges. A few practical takeaways stand out from BYN's experience.

Combining digital tools with in-person mentoring worked better than relying on just one or the other. My fieldwork showed that technology on its own cannot replace the kind of personal, hands-on knowledge that keeps things running. But if everything stays informal, there is a risk of losing that knowledge when people leave. The best approach seems to be setting up simple systems to keep track of what is being done, and just

as important, why it is being done that way, while also helping new people build the relationships they need to work well. Something like regular knowledge capture sessions could make this easier.

Multi-platform digital outreach strategies that meet target audiences where they are online helped BYN overcome some of the usual engagement barriers. They did not post the same thing everywhere, but instead paid attention to what worked best on each platform. This made a big difference. Other NGOs can take a similar approach by thinking about what each platform is good for, staying true to their message, and being aware that not everyone has the same access or digital skills. The platforms you choose can open doors for some people while leaving others out.

Adapting tools based on the situation and the people involved turned out to be essential. BYN's cross cultural work worked best when they used digital tools that were flexible and could be understood in different ways depending on who was using them. When tools are designed with different contexts and cultures in mind, they can support better collaboration instead of getting in the way.

One extra idea that came out of this study is the value of doing a proper handover when someone leaves. These handover sessions do not have to be complicated, but they can help new staff understand not just tasks and tools, but also the relationships and context that make things work. And when it comes to digital tools, finding ways to avoid relying too much on people's personal devices and subscriptions, like borrowing gear or partnering with technology donors, can make a big difference in long term stability.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

Focusing on a single NGO gave me deep insights, but it also came with limitations. I only spent three months with one organization, so what I found at BYN might not apply to other NGOs working in different places, with different goals, cultures, or contexts (Yin, 2018). I mostly focused on what was happening inside the organization, although I did include some observations about collaboration with community partners and the public. Future research could look more closely at how small NGOs use technology across different parts of their work and how these practices vary depending on size, mission, or cultural setting. This could also help generate more quantitative data to support broader comparisons. Another thing is that this research took a snapshot of BYN at a specific moment during a time of global change. It would be helpful to follow similar organizations over a longer period to see how digital practices change as they grow, shift focus, or respond to outside pressures. Studies like that could reveal patterns in what technology sticks, what gets dropped, and why.

It could also be useful to look at whether the things I saw at BYN show up in other small groups like community collectives, social enterprises, or mission driven small businesses. That kind of research might help design better support for small organizations trying to make the most of digital tools.

Final reflections

After three months at BYN, I realized that digital transformation is not only about technology. It is about people, relationships, and values. The most used tools at BYN were the ones that helped people stay connected, not the ones trying to replace human interaction. These experiences changed how I think about technology in organizations, and especially in small and medium-sized NGOs.

This research adds to the academic conversation on digital change in civil society by showing how small organizations make creative use of the tools that they have. Instead of seeing small and medium-sized NGOs as weaker versions of big ones, my case study shows that they often come up with their own approaches that focus on flexibility, inclusion, and staying true to their mission, sometimes in more powerful ways than top-down strategies.

My findings suggest that digital transformation in small NGOs is not mainly about upgrading systems or adding platforms. It is about how technology fits into daily organizational life. While digital tools can improve outreach, help with coordination, and support knowledge sharing, they cannot replace the trust, values, and lived experience that hold these organizations together.

BYN's case shows that small NGOs can make digital tools work for them when they focus on what matters most. The goal is not to chase the latest technology, but to fit it into what already works, to strengthen their mission, not distract from it. As technology becomes a bigger part of nonprofit life, BYN's experience offers a reminder that the most meaningful change still depends on people.

In the end, this research shows that digital transformation in small NGOs is not mainly a technology issue. It is an organizational and cultural one. Success depends not just on picking the right tools, but on using them in ways that support the shared purpose and relationships that drive the work forward.

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