

Case Study: Selecting Keywords to Map Audience Perceptions of Civic Space on Facebook

Introduction

In the discourse around ‘civic space’, language is not just descriptive—it is powerful, shaping public perception and understanding. For civil society organizations (CSOs) working in Italy, Hungary, Croatia, and Sweden, it’s crucial to know how the public perceives civic space and the organisations operating within it. However, civic discourse varies widely across these contexts, with each country using unique terms and reacting to distinct themes.

This case study outlines a structured keyword selection process tailored to these four countries. By selecting and refining keywords that resonate within each context, we aim to capture discussions and sentiments about civic space on Facebook, enabling CSOs to engage more effectively with their audiences.

Objective and Research Questions

The objective here isn’t simply to listen but to tune into specific frequencies of online dialogue that align with our research questions. These questions guide us toward the keywords that will help answer essential queries about public perceptions:

- **Understanding Terminology:** How do audiences interpret the term ‘civic space’? Do they see it as encompassing broad democratic principles, or do they associate it with specific activities like protests or advocacy?
- **Sentiment Triggers:** What terms evoke positive or negative connotations? Are some words more likely to provoke scepticism or support?
- **Impact of Opposing Narratives:** How deeply have anti-NGO narratives, such as viewing CSOs as foreign agents, influenced audience perceptions?
- **Recognition of CSO Roles:** Do audiences understand and support the roles CSOs play in promoting democratic values?

These questions guide keyword selection and refinement, ensuring each term is relevant to the local discourse.

Step 1: Initial Keyword Brainstorming

Our collaborative process began with teams from each country identifying keywords that would capture a comprehensive view of civic space and resonate culturally. Keyword selections included:

1. **Core Civic Space Keywords and Diverse Civic Bodies:**
 - Foundational terms like *civil society* and *activism* were universally relevant, with locally resonant terms like *civilsamhället* (Sweden), *udruga* (Croatia), *società civile* (Italy), and *civil szervezet* (Hungary) enhancing cultural alignment.
 - This set of keywords covered broad topics on civic engagement, grassroots movements, and community-based organisations. Broader terms, such as non-profit, charities, and human rights organisations, reflect the full spectrum of civic actors.



2. Negative Frames and Polarized Terms:

- To capture the full range of public sentiment, we included terms signalling opposition or suspicion, such as *foreign agents* and *Soros*, along with variations (e.g., *Sorosista* in Hungary).
- These keywords allow monitoring of polarised views and concerns about foreign influence or misuse of resources, essential for understanding the full context of civic discourse.

3. Key Organisational and Activism Terms:

- Keywords specific to recognised organisations (e.g., *Caritas* in Italy) or movements (e.g., *climate justice* in Sweden) capture discussions about well-known CSOs and activist groups.
- Activism-related terms, like *protests*, *civil disobedience*, and roles such as *human rights defenders* and *social justice advocates*, reflect both individual and collective activism.

4. Areas of Work and Local Advocacy Issues:

- Reflecting the diverse fields in which CSOs operate, keywords were selected to cover areas like human rights, social justice, equality, environmental protection, freedom of expression, and media freedom. For example:
 - Media freedom is tracked using terms like *Libertà dei media* in Italy and *ytttrandefrihet* (freedom of expression) in Sweden, often combined with *journalists* or *media* to focus on public discussions surrounding press freedom.
 - Italian terms include *attivismo sociale* (social activism) and *difensore dei diritti umani* (human rights defender), while in Sweden, keywords like *jämställdhet* (equality) and *klimaträttvisa* (climate justice) capture core advocacy areas.

5. Hashtags for Social Listening:

- Hashtags like *#CivilSociety*, *#HumanRights*, *#ClimateAction*, allow us to track popular narratives in civic discussions across contexts.

This initial brainstorming allowed us to visualize the types of conversations we hoped to capture and, just as importantly, those we hoped to avoid.

Step 2: Refining Keywords for Relevance and Specificity

A list of keywords is like a first draft—it's promising, but it needs refining to meet research goals. To enhance precision, we used [Boolean operators](#) (AND, OR, NOT) to include, broaden, or exclude terms as needed:

• Balancing Broad and Specific Terms:

- Certain keywords, like *association* or *campaign*, often pulled in unrelated discussions. To avoid irrelevant data, we used NOT operators to filter out non-civic topics. Here are some examples:



- In Croatia, we excluded terms like nuclear, sports, and military from searches for association to avoid references to sports teams or military organisations, ensuring we focused only on civic-related associations.
 - In Sweden, the term associational life was similarly refined by excluding references to Superettan and Allsvenskan, two major sports leagues, so that results would focus on civic organisations rather than sports clubs.
 - In Hungary, we narrowed searches for association by excluding terms like sports and Olympics, ensuring that civic discussions remained the focus rather than sporting associations.
 - In Italy, we excluded terms that did not focus on Italy, for example conversations of the civic space linked to the EU or France, etc.
 - (*"Spazio civico" OR #SpazioCivico*) NOT (*Francia OR Germania OR Unione Europea*)
- **Building Context into Aspect-Specific Keywords with Combined terms:**
 - To refine data around CSO roles, we paired keywords with additional phrases to focus results on discussions relevant to public perceptions of civic activities:
 - In Hungary, we used combinations to capture more specific discussions. For instance, pairing civil society with rights violations focused data on legal issues relevant to the civic sector:
 - (*jogsértő OR jogsérelem*) AND *civil*)
 - The Italian example combines 'Libertà di espressione' (freedom of expression) with 'giornalisti' (journalists) and 'media', focusing the query on issues of press freedom and challenges faced by journalists, which are prominent within the Italian civic space:
 - (*Libertà di espressione OR Libertà dei media*) AND (*giornalisti OR media*)
 - In Sweden, combining Sida (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) with organisation or development cooperation helped capture discussions specifically around development work and international aid:
 - (*Sida* AND (*organization OR development cooperation*))
 - In Croatia, the combination of kampanja (campaign) with various civic and social issues (such as rights, environmental protection, anti-discrimination, social justice, climate, equality, disability rights, democracy, rule of law, and personal data) focused the dataset on campaigns tied to civic space themes. The exclusion of terms like political, electoral, and pre-election filtered out conversations unrelated to non-partisan civic campaigns:
 - (*kampanja* AND (*prava OR "zaštita okoliša" OR antidiskriminacija OR socijalna OR socijalne OR pravda OR klima OR ravnopravnost OR "osobe s invaliditetom" OR demokracija OR "vladavina prava" OR osobni podaci*) NOT (*politička OR izborna OR predizborna*))



Step 3: Generating the Output File for Analysis

Real-world testing is where keyword selection comes to life. With the final query implemented, we generated an output file capturing conversations on civic space across Italy, Hungary, Croatia, and Sweden, ensuring a context-specific dataset ready for analysis.

- **Data Collection:** The finalised query gathered Facebook conversations focused on our research questions, providing a diverse snapshot of sentiments, terms, and contexts for each country.
- **Refinement:** Minor off-topic mentions were documented and used to adjust the query, refining data quality and further reducing noise.
- **Final Output:** The cleaned, organised dataset forms the basis for analysing public perceptions, narrative trends, and the impact of key civic themes in each country.

This output file lays the groundwork for extracting insights on civic space discourse and public sentiment.

Conclusion

Keyword selection is the backbone of social listening. By aligning keywords with targeted research questions, this case study creates a method for capturing meaningful conversations around civic space on Facebook. These insights illuminate the narratives and sentiments shaping public perceptions of CSOs in each country, supporting CSOs as they engage with audiences and communicate their societal roles.

Through this structured, adaptive approach, we gain a clear view of how civic space is viewed, discussed, and valued across different cultural contexts.

