Chapter 4

The Business of Advocacy: A Case Study of Greenpeace

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ABSTRACT

Online advocacy is big business. Online advocacy organisations need to structure themselves along business lines for fund raising, and to strategically utilise their online and traditional resources to achieve their goals. The growing influence of civil society organisations has been fuelled largely by an increase and ubiquity of emerging technologies. There is no evidence of a detailed analysis of social media led advocacy campaigns in the literature. The global environmental justice organisation, Greenpeace is used as a case study. The rise of online social media has provided the organisation with an alternative to traditional mass media. There have been some notable successes for Greenpeace. The most recent of which has been its efforts to halt the drilling for oil in the Arctic. Equally the Greenpeace campaigns have sometimes provoked the public ire, for example in their miscalculation of the fallout over their recent Nazca plains intrusion. It is clear that to attain any level of success the organisation needs to structure itself on sound business principles and strategies.

THE BUSINESS OF SOCIAL ADVOCACY

Early this century, Dahlgren (2005) recognised the increasingly strategic importance of mass media and emerging technologies in fostering public dialog. A consequence of this has been the transformation of the public sphere into technology-enabled spaces, where the current social narrative is able to circumvent geographic boundaries and time constraints, and increasingly the prevailing hegemonic discourse (Mason & Hacker, 2003).

The effect of a technology-enabled public sphere is contentious, with Poster (1995) as far back as 1995, arguing that Habermas’ description of the public sphere as being made up of an homogenous group of people in symmetrical relations is not sustainable in cyberspace i.e. if the discourse exists as “pixels

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on screens” then the question of talking and of meeting face-to-face is confused and complicated. Others like Benkler (2006) argue that it may strengthen democratic ideals with still others predicting that technology will splinter the public sphere (Sunstein, 2001). Dahlgren (2005) in particular draws attention to the fragmentation that occurs in the public sphere when opposing political views foster intolerance. The impact of the Internet on the prevailing political discourse is often difficult to describe with such attempts, often reduced to producing ‘opposing anecdotal evidence’ (Shirky, 2010a). Dahlgren (2005) does note however, that the Internet and social media in particular should be considered long-term tools that can ultimately strengthen civil society and the public sphere.

The impact and consequences of social media adoption on society are only just being realised and studied in detail, and there is no universal agreement as to its effects. Blogs for example have made it possible for the general public to act as journalists, which in turn has shifted the discourse to outside of the mainstream media. Other less optimistic viewpoints point to the fact that people generally restrict themselves to points of view to which they already subscribe, for example in the news sites that they read, which Kerbel & Bloom (2005) pointed out, could splinter and ideologically polarise the blogosphere. In research conducted to determine if blogs are comparable to Sunstien’s (2001) concept of the echo chamber, Gilbert, Bergstrom and Karahalios (2009) concluded that polarisation on the blogosphere differed according to genre of the blog, with blogs dedicated to technology and entertainment provoking the least amount of polarization as opposed to blogs dedicated to lifestyle and politics which caused higher levels of polarisation. In other research using social identity theory (SIT) and an interrogation of the blogosphere, Selva, Kuflik and Gustavo (2010) conclude that there has been an increase in the number of hate groups on the Internet with these groups often using blogs to establish an online presence.

Even the practical use of Web 2.0 does not provide any answers to the impact of the Internet on the prevailing social narrative with a noticeable difference in the strategic use of social media services by presidential hopefuls Barak Obama and Mitch Romney in the lead-up to the 2008 American elections. The Obama camp’s strategy for example, provided real-time campaign information, which as Rigby (2008) states helped capture the zeitgeist of the supporters, while the Romney campaign in contrast was unable to influence the campaign based on information from its followers. This is credited with playing a significant role in ensuring an Obama victory.

This chapter reports on an analysis of the role of emerging technologies in social advocacy and examines three social media-led campaigns executed by the global environmental justice civil society organisation (CSO), Greenpeace. Specifically the following research question is posed: What are the implications of Web 2.0 adoption on civil society organisations?, and in particular What transformation does Web 2.0 adoption bring to civil society organisations?

Environmental justice organisations and Greenpeace in particular, have been leaders in the adoption of emerging technologies, with many campaign victories stemming from their ability to adapt to communicating with these new technologies. Greenpeace, since its inception in 1971 has employed high-profile media-orientated protest campaigns to bring environmental issues to the attention of the public. While the effectiveness of these traditional campaign methods are understood, the effectiveness of these methods when migrated into the virtual realm need to be investigated.
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