Is social media really the answer? How issues create communities and communities create issues online.

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Intro to projects 300 words

Public relations practitioners are looking to the Internet as a new way to engage with stakeholders on public issues. There is myriad reasons for this marked shift in practice that is mirrored by the increase in academic research in the field of online communication, particularly the use of social media. These reasons may include the range of tools that are available, the access to individuals and groups whom, in the past, may have been too expensive, too remote or too marginalised to communicate with offline and the seemingly lower cost involved in building websites and utilising ‘free’ tools such as Facebook or Twitter, compared to more traditional tactics.

However, there is little hard evidence to show that engaging in social issues and publics through social media is any more or less effective than offline strategies or indeed traditional websites. Stakeholders now hold more power than many organizations in a growing range of issues in the public sphere (Fitch 2010, Fitch in Chia and Synnott 2012) and this is where the public relations industry is lagging behind.

In this paper we examine the social media activities of two groups, which at first sight may appear dissimilar/ non comparable, i.e. the Australian Asbestos Network (AAN) a National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia (NHMRC) funded research project, and the West Australian Anti-Nuclear Movement (WA ANM), a grassroots community group.

The ABN is a….. emerged in …., whilst the WA ANM is typically referred to as a traditional activist group, with a history that dates back more than four decades. Whilst the ABN largely focuses on advocacy and victim (not the right word) support, the WA ANM is known for its publicity stunts, demonstrations coinciding with uranium conferences and mass mobilization. Communications material for the ABN is created by paid staff? And researchers, whilst the ABN predominantly relies on activist volunteers whose availability fluctuates dramatically.

In Australia, asbestos was mined, manufactured and used extensively in construction until it was phased out from the late 1970s and finally banned for all uses in 2003. This usage left a toxic legacy in homes, workplaces and general infrastructure that continues to pose a serious public health threat. It has resulted in a growing epidemic of asbestos-related diseases, including the asbestos cancer mesothelioma, which is not
due to peak until at least 2020. However there is little public awareness of the health risks that asbestos still poses and it is therefore a matter of urgency that the public be alerted to the dangers of asbestos and advised of safe handling procedures to avoid exposure. The Australian Asbestos Network website draws on historical documentation and compelling personal stories as part of a wider communications strategy which seeks to create an online community of interest around the issue in the online public sphere.

WA ANM description

Both not funded corporations largely volunteer reliant, non-traditional PR functions in no benefit attached, focus on education, support and issue-based advocacy

The focus of this paper is on online communities, more specifically issue-based communities on Facebook. Both the ABN and the WA ANM have a dynamic online presence, which may be reliant on input by a small number of dedicated ‘managers’, but essentially only become significant and are given their meaning by those community members who congregate around the issue, hence the Facebook group or page.

By publicly affiliating themselves with a cause (i.e. liking it), ‘members’ communicate their online identity, part of, communicates who they are and what they stand for.

Public relations scholars have increasingly paid attention to how organisations, in particular activist organisation, online (e.g. Heath, 1998; Sommerfeldt, 2011; Stein, 2009; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009)

However, the focus here has been in particular on established not for profit organisations, such as Greenpeace and the Sierra Club, whose structure, funding and decision making models resemble those of modern organisations. Furthermore, the focus has been predominantly on how effective not for profit organisations are in replicating traditional PR activities online, such as media relations (Reber & Kim, 2006; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip), use of logo, inclusion of vision/mission (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip)etc. – hence conclusion that not for profit organisations fail to reach their full potential online (Taylor, et al., 2001) What has largely been ignored is the non commercial context / the role of online communities in facilitating a non-geography reliant meeting, discussion, education and advocacy platform for dispersed populations with a common interest. Arguably a purer form of public relations –as in not promoting an organizational perspective, but instead facilitate communication, support and action.

Social media as an enabler of social change-200 words

Information dissemination – needs user interest, buy in and contribution to
become meaningful
Group vs individual- facebook
Lack of boundaries to develop communities around issues – opportunity as facilitate congregation of geographically dispersed population

The barriers to social media use in NGOs-200 words
Time is more than you think
Need skills
Lack of resources – social media is not ‘free’ – lack of time, human resources and skills/training
Can’t be driven by organization, traditional promotional/publicity model will put of community – needs to be organic, responding to needs, subtle, i.e. facilitation of discussion based on information as opposed to promotion organization/ company line

Where to from here?-200 words (bit over)
What PR needs to know – important role for PR as opposed to related disciplines such as marketing and advertising, but needs to learn to hold back, empower community and acts as true facilitator in traditionally highlighted boundary spanning role What PR needs to do – back off, facilitate communication, encourage engagement, look beyond economic benefits and focus on bottom line

What community organizations need to know about the role of PR in social issues advocacy and engagement. – PR widely misunderstood, huge potential