



Is Social Media Really the Answer? How Issues Create Communities and Communities Create Issues Online

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Abstract

Public relations scholars have emphasised the role of the Internet, and in particular social media, as a new and effective way for communication professionals to engage with stakeholders on social issues. However, beyond conceptual papers, there has been limited to no empirical evidence that online spaces are indeed more effective when aiming to engage diverse, dispersed communities. This paper aims to address this gap, by examining the social media activities of two seemingly dissimilar communities: the Australian Asbestos Network and the West Australian Anti Nuclear Movement. The authors conclude that in an online advocacy context, communities create issues, as opposed to congregate around carefully crafted communications messages.

Keywords: new media, advocacy, social issues, public relations, virtual communities

Introduction

Public relations practitioners are looking to the Internet as a new way to engage with stakeholders on public issues. There is a myriad of reasons for this marked shift in practice that is mirrored by an increase in academic research in the field of online communication, particularly the use of social media. These reasons include the range of tools that have become available, the access to individuals and groups, which in the past may have been too elusive, remote or marginalised to be communicated with offline and the apparent lower cost associated with building websites and utilising 'free' tools such as Facebook, compared to more traditional tactics. However, looking beyond conceptual papers, there is little empirical evidence to demonstrate that engaging in social issues through social media is any more or less effective than traditional strategies. In fact, stakeholders now hold more power than many organisations in a growing range of issues in the public sphere (Fitch, 2012; J. Macnamara, 2010a, 2010b). The authors therefore argue that the public relations industry is lagging behind in adapting to those cultural power shifts and that its practitioners need to rethink the role they perform in the online space, with a particular focus on the actual needs of their key stakeholders. Based on two case studies, they argue that in order to be effective and meaningful within the online community context, public relations needs to focus less on control and reputation management than on intelligence gathering, engagement and most importantly community empowerment.

This paper examines the social media activities of two seemingly dissimilar communities; namely the Australian Asbestos Network (AAN), a National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia (NHMRC) funded project, and the West Australian Anti Nuclear Movement (WA ANM), a grassroots community opposed to the mining of uranium, the use of nuclear power and the deployment of radioactive weapons. Whilst the AAN is largely focused on providing an online resource that documents the historical legacy of asbestos based on storytelling, the WA ANM is known for its publicity stunts, demonstrations coinciding with uranium conferences and mass mobilisation in the 1980s and 90s. Like many other cause-related groups, due to the ease of access and relatively low associated cost, both groups have increasingly utilised online tools to communicate key messages and objectives. The focus of this paper is on the Facebook communities associated with both the AAN and the WA ANM, drawing on insight gained as part of a longitudinal, qualitative in-depth analysis of both forums.

Online advocacy and community groups

Both the AAN and the WA ANM can be described as what has traditionally been understood in the public relations literature as *activist groups*. In fact, this is the scholarly context in which non-corporate organisations and community groups have historically been investigated and analysed. Within this context, public relations scholars have increasingly paid attention to how non-traditional organisations communicate online (e.g. Heath, 1998; Sommerfeldt, 2011; Stein, 2009; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). However, although research into activism represents one of the dominant themes in academic PR literature and community advocacy has increasingly been recognised as a crucial area of public relations practice, insights gained have limited value within the community context, as 'activism' has been used as an all-encompassing construct, claiming to capture communication abilities and requirements of individual 'active citizens', community groups, dispersed movements, as well as international NGOs simultaneously. Moreover, the scholarly focus has been in particular on established non-government organisations (NGOs), whose structures, funding and centralised decision-making models increasingly resemble those of modern corporations (Demetrious, 2001; Jaques, 2006). This has led to the somewhat naïve conclusion that advocacy groups can be studied in a similar way to traditional PR departments (Holtzhausen, 2007). However, in contrast to established NGOs, on- and offline grassroots activism materialises in response to situations and issues and hence often lacks the benefit of established networks and resources (Demetrious, 2001). Nevertheless, the current PR research agenda gives large, international environmental NGOs the major share of attention. Prominent examples are the international NGO Greenpeace (e.g. Cooper, 2009; Gueterbock, 2004; Heath, 1998; Roper, 2005) and the Sierra Club (e.g. J. E. Grunig, 1989; Reber & Berger, 2005; Reber, Peterson, & Berger, 2010), which Reber et al. (2010) may refer to as practising grassroots activism, but which in fact is one of North America's oldest and largest environmental organisations.

When selecting a subject for their studies, scholars have largely relied on established databases such as Charity Navigator (Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009), Guidestar (Dreiling, Lougee, Jonna, & Nakamura, 2008) and envirolink.org (Reber & Kim, 2006; Taylor, et al., 2001). This has led to the automatic exclusion in research projects of smaller and less visible groups that are not registered for tax purposes, hence undermining the understanding of community advocacy groups like the AAN and the WA ANM. Closer inspection of different types of activist campaigns highlights the discrepancies in terms of resources, skills and capabilities across different segments and types of activism, hence questioning the generalisation of insights into 'PR capabilities' (e.g. L. A. Grunig, 1992;

Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, & Sriramesh, 2007; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Karagianni & Cornelissen, 2006; Smith & Ferguson, 2001), resources and 'clout'. Recent media reports have highlighted that some of Australia's biggest charities spend 'almost half their donations on fund-raising' (Browne & Whitbourn, 2013). In turn, these statistics emphasised the overall income of well-established charities, such as the National Heart Foundation, which raised more than \$51 million in 2012, of which it 'spent more than \$20 million on fund-raising' (Browne & Whitbourn, 2013). Money raising efforts aside, individual activists, community groups and geographically dispersed movements traditionally operate with the aid of volunteers, as opposed to paid staff and communication consultants. They rely on donations in terms of time and other resources from their existing volunteer base, rather than drawing on a multi-million dollar pool. Hence, a comparison across different types of activism categories has led to a misrepresentation of actual communication abilities, strategic capabilities and organisational structures. For the purpose of this study, *activism* is therefore understood as encompassing more than those established NGOs with a considerable public profile that PR scholars have largely focused on to date, being defined as follows:

Activism involves individuals, groups and movements, often loosely and fluidly connected, who undertake a range of planned and spontaneous communication activities with the aim of raising citizens' awareness of, providing information about, and confronting, challenging or reinforcing the existing distribution of power in society. Individual activists seek to motivate citizens to critically evaluate their existing knowledge, priorities and values related to one or more causes or issues, thereby encouraging and facilitating civic engagement in the democratic process, which they position not as a right, but a responsibility. (Wolf, 2013, p. 282)

Benchmarking against corporate standards has been particularly prominent within the online communication context, focusing on how effective not for profit organisations are in replicating traditional PR activities online, such as media relations (Reber & Kim, 2006; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2013), use of logo, inclusion of vision/mission (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2013), etc. – hence concluding that not for profit organisations have largely failed to reach their full potential online (Taylor, et al., 2001). This focus on established not for profit organisations may be explained due to their visibility and access for research purposes, in particular in relation to readily available and well-structured online presences. However, the benchmarking against commercial best practice models has resulted in limited insight into and understanding of the needs, requirements and

societal roles of less structured and managed online communities, such as the AAN and the WA ANM.

Is Facebook really a platform for online engagement?

Traditionally, the process of engaging stakeholders on issues of public interest, in the government, advocacy or corporate spheres, has relied heavily on mass communication channels such as media advertising, community surveying, focus groups and community meetings. Mass communication serves to 'increase awareness' of a particular issue, but if the message and chosen channels are not well conceived and tailored specifically to the audience they are directed at, the result can be less than effective, even detrimental. Today, organisations can find people relatively easily online but the task of identifying like-minded individuals and groups as 'real people' rather than the mass 'public' remains as difficult online as it is offline. It is even more important for NGOs and non-profit organisations to understand who they are talking to, what drives their communities and what they can do to garner support from these real life individuals and groups.

This is where social media, within the context of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0, differs in its potential as an engagement platform from 'the Internet' as a whole, (Macnamara, 2010a). With the context of advocacy and activism, Facebook in particular provides a unique opportunity for interpersonal interactions that traditional websites are unable to facilitate. Where a traditional website can provide issue-specific content, either user- or organisation-generated, depending on how interactive the site is, it cannot simulate a personal interaction between two or more individuals and as an extension intuitively communicate key messages whilst building two way communication opportunities (Desai, 2010; Jun, 2011). This is where user-driven communities of interest perform a pivotal role in connecting mainstream online media to dynamic content-driven platforms, the key characteristic of social networking sites.

In particular, the main premise of Facebook is to provide that experience through its various templates, including personal timelines, pages and closed community groups. Within the context of the pages template¹, organisations are able to develop communities of interest around issues, products, people and organisations as a means of buying and selling, raising awareness, generating support, developing advocacy and ultimately building long lasting relationships with community members. Although some longitudinal studies into the use of new media in public relations has been undertaken (Wright & Hinson, 2010), the efficacy of

¹ <http://www.facebook.com/help/www/174987089221178>

social networking sites as a community engagement platforms is not yet fully understood, due to a lack of empirical research and in depth insight into the dynamics of these 'spaces' (J. Macnamara, 2010a).

Bortree and Selzter (2009) investigate the efficacy of Facebook as a means of developing dialogic relationships between environmental advocacy groups and their communities online. They envisage social networking sites as platforms that 'provide organizations with a space to interact with key publics and to allow users to engage with one another on topics of mutual interest' (p.317), proposing that such platforms are ideal relationship-building nurseries for advocacy groups. However, they contend that these types of organisations may miss out on opportunities to develop a dialogue with community members due to the underutilisation of the tools available to them. This is not surprising given the resource and knowledge constraints faced by most small-medium sized NGOs and non-profits, again highlighting the idea that current communications models evident on the public relations literature, including dialogic communication (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Taylor, et al., 2001) and symmetrical communication (J. E. Grunig, 1992; J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984) (L. A. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) are inadequate as models for grassroots community-driven advocacy, activism and research groups.

In their analysis of social media management and use in public relations (Macnamara & Zervass, 2012) reiterate that although social media is in wide use "significant gaps remain in knowledge of how organizations are using social media and how these important new channels of communication can and should be utilized in the context of public relations and corporate communication' (p.289). Again, this emphasises the lack of empirical research and analysis into what is becoming a mainstream communication methodology, rather than a short-term trend. What seems to be widely agreed upon is that Facebook has the potential to be an effective facilitation tool; one that can reach a defined number of people who are interested in effecting change, raising awareness or simply staying in touch with issues relevant to their lives. However, this is yet to be empirically tested and confirmed.

To summarise, public relations scholarship has largely ignored the role of communication in a non-commercial contexts and its role in facilitating online advocacy, which is what the authors are addressing in this in-depth analysis of two (online) community advocacy/research groups.

Two public health issues online

The focus of this paper is on online communities, more specifically, issue-based communities on Facebook. Both the AAN and the WA ANM have a

dynamic online presence, which may be reliant on input by a small number of dedicated content ‘managers’, but essentially only become significant and are given their meaning by those community members who congregate around the issues, hence the Facebook group or page, as is illustrated in the following case studies.

The Australian Asbestos Network Project (AAN)

In Australia, asbestos was mined, manufactured and used extensively in construction until it was phased out from the late 1970s onwards 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 cancer mesothelioma, which according to epidemiologists (Olsen, 2011) is yet to peak. Historically, there has been a lack of public awareness of the health risks that asbestos poses in day-to-day life in Australia and it is therefore perceived as a matter of urgency by health professionals that the public be alerted to the dangers of asbestos and advised of safe ways to avoid exposure now and into the future. This has been one of the key research areas for the Australian Asbestos Network website, a four year National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) funded grant project aiming to determine the methods by which to engage the Australian community on the issue of Asbestos-related diseases, primarily in the online space². The story of asbestos in Australia is told through the experiences of those who suffered during the first two waves of illnesses: 1. Those who worked in the mines and mills and 2. Those who worked directly with the material in manufacturing and construction. Today, the website content continues to grow, but focuses more on the stories and media coverage of those people in the community (in Australia and internationally) who are falling victim to what is referred to as the ‘third wave’, caused by renovation of homes and workplaces built before the early 1980s³.

Through research into the role of harnessing journalistic and historical storytelling, as well as public relations storybuilding, as means of social issues engagement, the project team attempts to address its research questions by telling the history of asbestos and then engaging with key community opinion leaders, as well as government and policy makers to further develop, collaboratively, the overall story of asbestos in Australia or, more accurately, a set of stories. The project aims to enlist the online and offline community to contribute actively, by articulating their own narratives, thereby mobilising a change in attitudes towards unnecessary risk-taking in

² <http://www.australianasbestosnetwork.org.au>

³ <http://www.australianasbestosnetwork.org.au/Asbestos+History/The+Health+Disaster/The+Three+Waves/default.aspx>

the group most at risk of future illnesses, i.e. the third wave. By attempting to connect diverse groups of people with their individual past and present experiences of asbestos, the stories themselves serve to forge the community rather than being built (or assumed as given) as a consequence of a targeted campaign. Thus both the website and social media platforms are pivotal to the activity of community storybuilding. In this way, the community emerges from storytellers on the website, offline stakeholder groups and members on Facebook and Twitter, who have chosen to follow both the AAN, the AAN avatar called The Renovator and other related Australian and international community, advocacy and research groups in the social media sphere.

It is important to note that the concept of 'organisation' in this project is also unique in that the AAN (as a quasi 'organisation') was created from a unique collaboration of medical, public health, media and social science researchers, who developed the website as a consequence of the need to tell stories to draw community attention to the issue⁴. Thus the idea of community was developed from the inside out. The uniqueness of this approach is marked by the fact that it does not reproduce the conventional scenario in which a public health communicator is charged with the responsibility for building and communicating messages, thinly disguised as stories, on behalf of an organisation, designed to resonate with stakeholders. Instead, the knowledge, expertise, experience and the emotion of different individuals and groups comprising the emergent community, including the organisation itself, are variously brought to bear on the ongoing and collaborative development of stories and media links, which may be multilayered, discontinuous and diverse.

The AAN joined the Facebook community in November 2011, launching a page rather than a group. This decision was directly linked to the research methodology that required a level of distance between the project and the emergent community. The experiment, which is still live, aims to observe the development of the community through posting news stories from the Internet and the website itself, liking and following other groups online in order to share their content and provide a space for those interested to post and share their own personal stories and experiences with other interested people. Between the launch and January 2013, the page has developed a following of over 180 likes with a slow but steady growth pattern and a steady retention pattern. The small number of 'likers' is not unexpected considering the nature of the content and the fact that Asbestos as a topic in Australia still struggles for mainstream media and community attention. However, this has changed in recent years, due to

⁴ <http://www.australianasbestosnetwork.org.au/Project+Background/The+Project+Team/default.aspx>

high profile media cases such as the National Broadband Network (NBN) asbestos contamination issue in 2013⁵ and ongoing cases of asbestos exposure in workplaces, schools and public buildings across the country⁶. To date, Facebook has drawn over 500 referral visits to the main website, which has seen over 50,000 visits between November 2011 and November 2013, thus making up around 1% of the total visitor profile. Although generating referral traffic was initially a key goal of the Facebook strategy, the development of the community for the purpose of sharing knowledge, supporting asbestos sufferers and carers and providing information for the wider community has become a key driver to keeping the page alive within the limited resource constraints faced by the project.

A key outcome of the AAN Facebook strategy is the development of international relationships with larger advocacy and research organisations in the United States, Europe, India and the United Kingdom. By following and sharing content from these organisations, the AAN is able to extend its reach outside of Australia and in particular Western Australia, which a majority of the website content is based upon⁷. Facebook has become a key element of the sustainability of the project past the end of the research and funding cycle. Where websites require ongoing maintenance, technical and communications support, Facebook can be largely driven by a small number of people; an important consideration for a small research-oriented project working within a broad, at times controversial, public health issue space.

The West Australian Anti Nuclear Movement (WA ANM)

When compared against and contrasted with corporate social media best practice guidelines (see e.g. Waters, et al., 2009), the WA ANM's Uraniumfree WA Facebook community fails to meet key communication requirements. The site does not feature a logo, link to an organisational website, nor details of its (organisational) history, vision and mission. There are no administrator or other contact details beyond the automatically generated Facebook email address. Waters, et al.'s (2009) analysis of non-profit sites identified the inclusion of press releases a key criteria, which is clearly missing in this context due to the nature of the WA ANM online community. One or more of the community's members may publish related media information as part of their professional roles (e.g. the Uraniumfree

⁵ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/shorten-orders-summit-to-tackle-asbestos-scourge/story-fn59niix-1226654818100>

⁶ <http://www.australianasbestosnetwork.org.au/Media+Archive/default.aspx>

⁷ The AAN project began as the Asbestos Stories project. The primary focus of the first two-year NHMRC grant was to collect and publish online stories of those people who had been affected by asbestos and its related diseases through their involvement with the CSR/James Hardie mining operation in Wittenoom in the north of Western Australia. You can read more about the history of Wittenoom at

<http://www.australianasbestosnetwork.org.au/Asbestos+History/Asbestos+at+Wittenoom/default.aspx>.

The project then expanded to include stories from other parts of Australia.

Advocate, employed by the Conservation Council of WA); however, media representatives are not an audience of this particular community. Equally, the page is characterised by a visible absence of site rules and guidelines. Instead, it has deliberately been designed in a straight forward, easily accessible way, which focuses less on sophistication and design principles than on community engagement. Unlike some commercial Facebook pages, access to the discussion board and comment functions are not only enabled, but participation is actively encouraged.

From a WA ANM perspective it would not be practical to include phone numbers or other contact details of individuals, as the site represents an organic community, as opposed to a centrally coordinated initiative. Equally, the inclusion of an event calendar, as suggested by Waters, et al. (2009), becomes redundant, as priorities and diaries are co-created by the community, based on their interests and consequent posts. Similarly, community groups like the WA ANM are often not able to set themselves up for donation purposes, nor have an online (or offline) store as suggested in Waters et al.'s (2009) and Bortree and Seltzer's (2009) best practice criteria for Facebook. This basic and uncritical application of corporate best practice guidelines to online communities highlights the wider inadequacy of applying commercial understanding and perspectives to the analysis of non-commercial entities' abilities and needs. What the scholarly PR community has to date largely failed to investigate is what is needed to enable community groups to flourish and engage, rather than how they can become more like corporate PR departments.

Despite its failure to meet best practice guidelines for online tools as identified in the extant PR literature, and without overt promotion of the actual site, the WA ANM community has grown substantially over the past years, from a couple of hundred 'friends' in 2010, to more than 4500 (4,581) community 'members' by the end of 2013. This volume represents a stark contrast to WA ANM affiliates that attended face-to-face planning meetings (<10) and public actions (e.g. demonstrations, sit ins, fundraisers) (<100) during the same period of time. This disparity highlights the role of the online community in connecting interested citizens beyond their physical and resource abilities, which may prevent them from attending events in person. The online community enables its members to remain informed and engaged. Furthermore, it encourages creativity and facilitates engagement, as opposed to enforcing pre-determined standards and foci, as common within a corporate context.

From an administrative perspective, the WA ANM online community is coordinated via the Uraniumfree WA identity, which is linked to the Uraniumfree Advocate employed by the Communication Council of WA. However, rather than ensuring centralised coordination of online activities,

account login details have been shared with keen volunteers, who may post under the Uraniumfree WA identity, as well as approve new community members (or 'friends'). No apparent filter appears to be applied to friend requests. With over 4,500 members, the community's main aim is to provide a platform for likeminded people, which however does not discriminate overtly against corporate and / or industry observers (i.e. there is no policy for background screening). Once 'befriended', the site's discussion board becomes openly available to any 'friend' or 'member' to voice their concerns, share news and comment on others' post. This relaxed approach to the site's access reflects the WA ANM's open and all-inclusive positioning, which includes a readiness to engage with challengers and opposing views.

As corporations struggle to adapt to the need for 24 hour, 7 day a week monitoring of their online presence, the WA ANM community has not only distributed this responsibility, but furthermore does not appear to perceive a need for any major form of monitoring, enforcement of guidelines and the protection of its reputation. Instead, as community numbers have grown, the WA ANM has increasingly relied on peer- or self-censorship via the comment function. As news and discussion content is owned by the forum's members, there is a visible absence of abusive, controversial and most noticeably pro-industry posts and comments. As in its offline presence, the WA ANM seeks to be all inclusive and tolerant, i.e. principally opposes the censoring of content. This broadminded attitude explains why the WA ANM community is not limited to the mining of uranium, the use of nuclear power and the deployment of radioactive weapons. Instead, members regularly share information and calls to action for related causes that they may feel passionate about, such as fracking, refugee rights and the protection of indigenous rock art. Equally, the scope of actions and news is not limited to Western Australia, but extends to the rest of the country and even overseas.

What becomes apparent is that the site content is dominated by contributions from a small number of community members, who however vary over time. The vast majority of the 4500+ community members can best be described as observers. The most consistent contributor is the Uraniumfree WA identity itself. However, in contrast to best practice advice in PR practitioner literature, contributions are not consistent, but instead markedly irregular. There are noticeable periods of inaction, as well as times of high activity, which are indisputably linked to volunteer availability, as well as dependent on offline actions (e.g. sharing of photos of community actions/events) and topical news items. This variability in contributors and the volume of content highlights the issues-driven nature of the WA ANM community, which is linked to a cause (i.e. a desire to end the mining and use of uranium) as opposed to an organisation, product or

service. Within this context the focus is on community driven content, rather than one-way distribution of organisational information via carefully crafted messages, mission statements and media releases. This community focus is arguably what makes this site so popular. The authors argue that this flat, all-inclusive structure is a key characteristic of online communities, fostering active engagement, information sharing and expression of opinion.

In the absence of competitions, product discounts or other promotional incentives that encourage individuals to 'like' Facebook pages or join groups, the key attraction to sign up to the WA ANM online community is clearly access to issues related information (news and events), which is typically not easily available via mainstream channels (e.g. the Australian media). Secondly, in associating themselves with a particular cause, i.e. the Uraniumfree WA identity, community members make a public statement about who they are and what they stand for, irrespective of how often they actively contribute to the site content or the message board.

Discussion:

Similarities and differences – what can be learnt?

A closer inspection reveals that both communities have more in common than it may initially appear. Despite the AAN's NHMRC funding, both communities are characterised by a lack of resources and minimal to no dedicated communications staff, i.e. a reliance on passionate community volunteers and researchers, as opposed to specialists. Equally, at the core of both issues lie natural resources, which have been extensively mined in Australia and whose (perceived) health and social impacts have motivated communities to rally against them, demanding greater transparency and visibility within the public domain, without any immediate personal gain. Both communities work closely with medical professionals and source support from the academic community to strengthen their issue-based advocacy efforts. Most importantly, both aim to mobilise communities around a health-related issue, by providing information that is not widely available in the public domain and provide a platform that enables individuals to get informed, meet likeminded people and become engaged.

The AAN and the WA ANM (via its Uraniumfree profile) fail to meet the majority of best practice guidelines that have been developed for a commercial context, such as carefully crafted positioning statements and media sections. Instead, their focus has been on community generated content. Both provide news updates, links to research, public events and opportunities to comment on their Facebook pages. In doing so they provide convenient access to issue relevant information that may not be (easily) accessible in the mainstream (media). They furthermore allow

individuals to express their support by liking the page or a particular news item, thereby enabling them to make a public statement about their values and interests. Both pages allow community members to post their own comments, articles, photos or videos, i.e. enabling them to contribute issue-related content and commentary. Based on the findings gained from the two case studies above, the authors argue that without active followers and audience-focused posts, Facebook communities remain meaningless.

Social media sites may be expertly crafted and executed from a tactical public relations perspective; however, it is the level and quality of community engagement that provides them with value and meaning. For example, over the past two years the WA ANM has increasingly moved away from administrator-published content to posts contributed by its community. As a result the page content may at times divert from its strict anti-nuclear focus, however, the unpolished, community generated interaction has resulted in increased activity and members, subscribers or followers. The AAN has predominantly relied on administrator-published content to generate common links with other Asbestos groups online in order to raise the profile of the issue in the social media sphere and to increase access to relevant information despite a lack of resources. This has equally led to increased activity and support of the AAN pages.

As individuals associate themselves with a cause by joining a group or 'liking' a page, they publicly define their (online) identity, i.e. they communicate to their peers who they are, what they stand for and what issues they want to be associated with. In this context 'identity' is not attached to a location, but the issue. In doing so, community members not only define their own public persona, they also create spaces of common interest and give them meaning. Without such unprompted support and voluntary affiliation, PR created communities remain meaningless, irrespective of their affiliated resources, design proficiency and communications expertise.

Conclusions: Is social media really the answer?

The authors recognise that the level of sophistication of online tools, as well as the overall presence and organisational structure of the two communities discussed in this article, are not comparable to those of multi-national NGOs, which discipline scholars have largely focused on to date. In fact, we have deliberately steered clear of what may be defined as 'mainstream activism' and suggest that community groups, such as the AAN and the WA ANM, fulfil an entirely different but important role in society, which has been largely ignored in public relations literature to date. This highlights the need for a move away from traditional, top down, tightly controlled public relations approaches, to a broader scholarly and industry approach, which

recognises the many facets of advocacy in society. We argue that within this context, communities *create* issues – as opposed to gathering around carefully crafted and communicated issues and messages online. Rather than the quality of communication messages, or the sophistication of the platform used, engaged and empowered individuals are the key elements to add validity and importance to a particular issue.

Is social media really the answer? Possibly. However, PR scholarship has traditionally focused on how non-traditional communicators appropriate commercial products and services, thereby failing to recognise that social media perform a different communication function within the social movement or virtual community context. Online community advocacy groups are ‘often built around issues for which there is no widespread consensus or sympathy’ (Hirsch, 2011, p. 135), or in fact urgency, support or interest within the mainstream (media). Hence, social media platforms, such as Facebook, ‘enable loosely coordinated groups of individuals to spontaneously mobilise and share information’ (p. 135). It is vital to recognise that these types of community members are aligned to a cause or an issue they are passionate about, and not a particular organisation or service. Hence, the focus of online advocacy communities is on individuals, information sharing and empowerment, instead of reputation management and organisational goals.

We argue that the traditional promotional/publicity model may work for large brands and product-focused Facebook pages, but is ineffective in an online advocacy context. Organisational representatives, such as PR professionals, may be able to support and provide content; however, online spaces only become meaningful if they are community owned. We argue that public relations has a crucial role to play in social issues, (online) advocacy and the engagement of communities. This role has to date has been largely ignored in favour of a focus on corporate bottom lines and economic return on investment, but needs to be addressed, if public relations is to develop into a critical scholarly discipline in its own right.

Limitations

The authors recognise the limited scope of this study to two Australian-based, geographically dispersed community groups. However, both have been studied over a prolonged period of time (three years+) and analysed in depth, thereby providing rich insight into their online communication practices, strengths and needs. Moreover, both groups are not unique in terms of funding restrictions, reliance on volunteers and lack of sophisticated, dedicated communications expertise. They thereby reflect the needs, challenges and opportunities of millions of online community advocacy groups around the world.

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