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THE STORY OF PR

🔍 Looking back at landmark communications



MOVEMENT FOR CHANGE

With a rich history of campaigning for change, not for profits remain some of communications' leading innovators.

By Michaela O'Brien

The not for profit sector has been an innovator in communications for more than a century. From the suffragettes' early use of what we would today call branding – their distinctive green, purple and white colour palette, the consistency of the Votes for Women and Deeds not Words messaging across leaflets, banners, badges and even tea sets – not for profits have been trailblazers. The suffragettes had a sophisticated approach to media management and pioneered the use of photocalls. Around the time when Ivy Lee famously wrote the first press release, the suffragettes had press secretaries who gave journalists written briefings and alerted them to photo opportunities such as

suffragettes chaining themselves to railings, mass demonstrations, and speeches delivered (in one striking 1908 example) to members of parliament by a spokeswoman on a boat, branded with the Votes for Women slogan, floating on the Thames.

Gandhi's salt march in India in 1930 also used mass rallies of ordinary people to draw media and politicians' attention to social injustice. Many not for profits have drawn on Gandhi's legacy of non-violent direct action, notably the UK's Cam-

campaign for Nuclear Disarmament with their landmark march to the atomic weapons research establishment in Aldermaston in 1958 and sit-ins and die-ins (still a popular photocall technique used today) in the 1960s.

Campaigner Paul Hilder traces the origins of social change campaigning back to the 1600s, and cites the campaign to abolish the slave trade as “arguably the first popular movement for policy change sustained over decades”. The campaign’s techniques were not dissimilar to those used today by many not for profits: a network of local groups holding public meetings and distributing information to raise awareness; a large petition delivered to members of parliament, a supportive, high profile politician (William Wilberforce) leading the campaign inside parliament. Hilder goes so far as to say that “much of the repertoire of social campaigning had already been developed by the mid-nineteenth century”.

In the 1960s, social changes such as the rise of women’s and gay rights and other identity-based movements signalled the start of a new wave of social change campaigning. By the 1970s, the increased popularity of television let huge audiences see the media-friendly and highly visual tactics of new environmental organisations like Greenpeace, whose non-violent direct action followed the Quaker tradition of bearing witness.

Not for profits have developed their tactics as the media has changed and helped develop today’s media management ‘toolkit’ of statistics, case studies, photocalls, human interest and expert opinion, along with storytelling and content creation. Today many employ communications professionals with the enviable job title of storytellers to

help them engage supporters, politicians and other decision makers across all media and social media platforms through the power of individuals’ stories. And the sector leads the way in exploring the power of framing, informed by ideas drawn from psychology, to shape campaign communications.

Looking at the way technology impacts on communications, we can see that the not for profit sector has once again been a pioneer. Greenpeace has always been an early adopter, producing video news releases in the 1980s and beaming images via satellite from its ships in mid-ocean to the world’s broadcasters, while Friends of the Earth pioneered geographical information systems (GIS) in the early 1990s to create publically accessible, localised maps of ground water pollution and toxic waste sites. In 1996, Friends of the Earth launched its first campaign website during the Newbury Bypass campaign, the biggest road protest that had

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been seen in Britain. While the media focused on dramatic imagery of security forces using heavy machinery to remove protestors from trees along the proposed bypass route, the Friends of the Earth website described sustainable alternatives to the road and was lauded in PR Week and Design Week as getting across the full story that most media reports had overlooked. Nearly 20 years later, communicators in every sector are using online media to bypass journalists in their gatekeeper role and to inform and engage supporters directly. Friends of the Earth’s current high profile Bee-Cause campaign, with its interactive map showing supporters’ action to protect bees, draws on 20 years of innovation in GIS and online communication.

ONLINE PIONEERS More recently, the new breed of not for profits such as 38 Degrees and Sum of Us have pioneered innovative ways to engage supporters through social media, mobilising people with concerns about social justice who previously would have struggled to connect with each other. By combining online and offline techniques, they have created a new, nimble approach to citizen participation which won the first policy U-turn of the current British coalition government when 38 Degrees’ landmark Save Our Forest campaign killed plans to sell off the country’s public forest. Change.Org (originally a not for profit and now a social enterprise) estimates that



5,000 online Change.Org petitions launched in 2014 achieved their social change goal: one victory an hour. They include the success of Fahma Mohamed, a school pupil from Bristol, whose petition attracted nearly 250,000 signatures and secured agreement from the government to urge schools in the UK to protect pupils at risk from female genital mutilation (FGM).

The most dynamic of the longer standing NGOs have been rapidly evolving their campaign communications to adapt to the changes and opportunities offered by social media. Greenpeace's IceClimb event in 2013, for example, trended on Twitter and led news bulletins, integrating media interviews, live web streaming and social media engagement simultaneously as its six climbers scaled the Shard in London as part of a campaign to protect the Arctic from oil drilling.

The sector is a big employer of communications professionals, attracting those keen to tackle the world's most intractable problems – poverty, the causes of ill-health, social injustice, environmental degradation and discrimination. Networks like Charity Comms, with a membership of 4,000, and the eCampaigning Forum with nearly 3,000, bring them together to share best practice in communications. The Chartered Institute of Public Relations and Public Relations Consultants Association both have for not for profit sector groups.

ACADEMIC CONTEXT Yet this vibrant and important branch of our profession is remarkably under-reported in mainstream textbooks and teaching. Some key text books like Ralph Tench and Liz Yeomans' *Exploring PR* include a chapter on not for profit public relations as a specialist area. A few degree courses offer an optional charity module since we pioneered that at the University of Westminster in 2007, but the MA we set up last year in Media, Campaigning and Social Change is remarkably the only UK university course of its kind, looking at the communications role within social change campaigns.

Too often, the richness of communications within the not for profit sector is discussed solely in the context of risk management, rather than in the context of open debate about topics of public interest, or in the context of sustainability and social justice.

Academic and best practice texts on public relations often privilege the corporate voice and position NGOs as a risk for 'legitimate' corporate public relations to manage. James E. Grunig's influential situational theory of publics, for example, enshrines activists and NGOs as 'active publics' which pose a risk to 'legitimate' corporate prac-

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Change through innovation

- ➔ The use of branding and other communication techniques in social campaigning were already developed by the mid nineteenth century
- ➔ The not for profit sector continues to innovate and today is one of the largest employers of communicators
- ➔ The sector was usually discussed from the business perspective only in terms of risk management, though lately it has gained wider focus
- ➔ Increased budgets and sophistication have brought new challenges for balancing storytelling and respectful framing

tioners. Others, such as Denise Deegan's guide *Managing Activism* also assume an oppositional relationship. For Deegan, risk means risk to corporate reputation caused by social change campaigns, rather than any risk to employees, society or the ecosystem caused by the actions of corporations. As Jacquie L'Etang wrote in 2009: "The dominant paradigm in public relations is firmly rooted in the concerns of US capitalism... Activists appear to be constructed as problematic in public relations. They are the other, the implied organisational opponents."

Some academics are beginning to acknowledge the role not for profits have played in developing the profession, with American academics Tim Coombs and Sherry Holladay and Australia's Kristin Demetrious among those leading the way in challenging the corporate-centric view of public relations.

Today, many not for profits have large budgets, professional management, codes of conduct and special-

ist staff liaising across international offices to run strategically planned campaigns. With this increasing sophistication and professionalisation come other dilemmas. For example, some wrestle with the role of the communicator in-house. How should fundraising, campaigning and communications work together? The different specialisms can compete for control of messaging and budgets just as marketing and public relations have battled for dominance in organisations in the corporate sector. The tension is complicated in the not for profit sector by the values-based approach. Is it acceptable to use images of starving children in Africa to raise funds for a development charity, because they work well in fundraising campaigns, when these images can be counterproductive? Recent research from Common Cause argues that this type of imagery perpetuates the belief Africa cannot solve its own problems, eventually undermining the public under-

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standing and support that is needed to reduce global poverty. Tackling these issues, and making best use of technology, is beginning to create a new role that I term the campaign communicator, which blurs the lines between siloed functions and works across disciplines. NGOs such as Action Aid are leading the way in balancing storytelling, respectful framing and engaging calls to action in their work on campaigns like the Tax Justice Campaign. Rethink are doing similar work on their campaign Time to Change.

Photo: Private

A growing sector also wields greater power and recently the spotlight in the UK has been on the influence of not for profits in the lead up to a general election, and with the introduction of the Lobbying Act 2014. Critics of the sector’s influence tend to conflate the terms political and party political, but this is a distortion of the not for profit role. Few would want to restrict their scope or influence by aligning themselves to a specific political party. In fact, registered charities are not allowed to do so. But working on the issues that affect some of the most vulnerable people in our society – for example those with mental health problems or physical disabilities - inevitably requires addressing the social, political and economic reasons why they face those problems, and targeting campaigns at the causes of social injustice. Yet not for profits as diverse as Save the Children and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) have been attacked for campaigns that highlight the causes of poverty or harm, rather than simply patching up the resulting injury. As the RSPB’s Martin Harper said earlier this year: “For 125 years, the RSPB has been campaigning to change law, policy, attitudes and behaviour to benefit wildlife – this is central to our charitable purpose.”

ADDRESSING PROBLEMS, CREATING CHANGE

At the heart of not for profit communication is the desire to solve a problem. The UK’s National Council of Voluntary Organisations describes campaigning as “an activity that aims to create change. It brings energy and passion to public debates and ensures that a wider range of voices are heard – including the voices of the disadvantaged.” No wonder it attracts criticism. As Danielle Stein and Craig Valters wrote in 2012: “Any change process in the social world will inherently engage with and run up against structures of power and interest... be they state apparatuses, social norms or economic patterns.”

NGOs and charities are part of a rich and vibrant not for profit sector that offers lessons for all communications professionals. This article has touched on just a few of the factors that shape the sector and make it worth more attention. |



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