People, Power and Public Relations

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Abstract  Public relations is conventionally viewed from a corporate perspective. However, recent events in Victoria have illustrated the fact that grassroots activism holds an increasing share of public relations expertise. In contemporary Victoria civil activism has advanced a long way from traditional adversarial NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) campaigns and has succeeded in generating both social and cultural change. How does a civil activist approach the complex problem of public relations? How do they convince publics their arguments are in the interest of the whole community? Is it a question of mimicking corporate techniques or has a new style of public relations evolved specific to their needs? This paper examines a case study in which an outer - suburban grassroots activist group effected significant change in state government and corporate policy. The results challenge the view that public relations is the exclusive tool of large corporations and governments, and calls for a redefinition of ‘what is public relations’?

Introduction

Perceptions of grassroots activism and its relationship to public relations now are balanced at a critical point. Changing social, political and technological environments of the early 21st Century1 together with contemporary views of public relations as a ‘professional activity and an intellectual domain’ (Dozier and Lauzen, 2000, pp.3-22) are producing new ways of seeing power, legitimacy and change.2 However, many corporations and activists still operate in dated paradigms more relevant to previous eras than today, unaware that their objectives may be achieved in other ways.

Global chairman of Public Relations consultancy Hill and Knowlton, Howard Paster, recently said, “he was concerned about the perception that public relations involved manipulation or spin… there are bad players in every industry and the trick is to distinguish yourself from that…” (The Age, 27/6/00). It is a

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commonly articulated perception that public relations has a narrow focus on 'propaganda' or 'spin' but less acknowledged is the equally powerful perception that manipulation and spin are allied to powerful elites such as large corporations, organizations and governments who have the financial budgets, organizational structures and long-term objectives to mount sophisticated communications programs. This entrenches the view of public relations as propaganda, but also taints the profession as being socially undemocratic. Public relations practitioners working for corporations often are caught up in a view of activism as a part of a 'natural' social cleavage intrinsically associated with labour movements who are predictably adversarial and antagonistic to corporations' self interest.

The fact that public relations as activism receives so little attention supports the theory that public relations has become part and parcel of the maintenance of metanarratives and domination in society. In fact, activists are often portrayed as the enemy of organizations and government (Holtzhausen, 2000, p.100).

Grassroots activists who mount campaigns often view corporations as capitalist structures with simplistic exploitative relationships to communities. Hostility erupts and a polarisation of views and approaches often cements each party into rudimentary adversarial roles that employ basic communication tactics and strategies.

Sophisticated benchmarks in public relations are certainly not associated with low budget, spontaneous, short-term grass roots or community activism, however this is precisely the area where advances have been made. This paper uses the case study of Werribee Residents Against Toxic Dump (WRATD) launched in 1995, to discuss the changing relationship to between activism and public relations.

**Activism and Power**

Activism is a broad term and needs to be defined to explore its relationship with public relations. Many examples of activism are proactive with ongoing ideological agendas and sustained organisational structures, such as large non governmental organizations, (NGOs) and not for profit organizations. Examples of NGOs are Friends of the Earth, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, while not for profit organizations include trade and industry associations, charities, churches and schools etc. These organizations operate largely in areas such as fundraising, media relations and public advocacy and aim to promote greater awareness of the group and its objectives. They also develop long-term goals and organizational structures congruent with profit-based organizations. Grunig’s
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‘global theory of public relations’ maintains there are four models of public relations3 and evidence that the same general principles apply to activist groups; “Except, perhaps, for small community groups, most activists groups are powerful organizations in their own right” (J.E. Grunig, 2000, p.43).

Grassroots activism is intrinsically different to other forms of activism as it reactively responds to situations as they appear. Participants in grassroots activism often do not have the benefit of established networks, links to dominant coalitions, infrastructure and knowledge of resources more established ‘proactive’ activist groups enjoy. ‘Power’ is in short supply. While public relations is often defined as strategically managing the communication process between an organization and publics; ‘strategic management’ for grassroots campaigns is dependent on the very availability of resources to set accurate goals and objectives. The ideological heat that motivates people to take action on social or political issues, combined with the reality of straining to fit in work responsibilities and families imposes restrictions on achievable and realistic objectives. Often represented by the media as ‘underdogs’, grassroots activists largely employ a one-dimensional approach to public relations to set public agendas and promote debate of issues.

A description of how perceptions of power affect the behaviour of grassroots activists is summarised by Charles T. Salmon (1989, p.25):

Challenger groups are often poorly funded and poorly organized; lack of organization, social power and resources, in turn dictates reliance on less-than optimal campaign strategies... Instead, these groups must rely more heavily on what have traditionally been considered public relations tactics of garnering ‘free’ publicity through the planning of events which are congruent with journalists’ definition of news.

Views like this, and perhaps the perception of public relations as the exclusive tool of ‘big business’, has locked grassroots activists into ‘media grabbing’ behaviour such as developing colourful stunts to draw attention to key messages. A mock funeral of ‘dead’ native forest paraded down a main street, or protestors burying themselves in the sand at Bondi Beach in protest at the erection the Olympic Volleyball Stadium are examples of this. While these stunts may appeal to media gatekeepers as a chance to diversify the six o’clock news content, the institutions with which society believes power rightfully resides have ultimately driven ‘change’.

In many ways grassroots activists have pursued publicity as the means of conveying their message with little more sophistication than PT Barnum in the 19th Century. And while ‘publicity grabs’ continue to remain a legitimate element of public relations campaigns, grassroots activists need to employ a far wider range of tactics and strategies to affect the change they seek.4 The more complex issues of gaining legitimacy and framing issues and the supervision of
relationships for example, are critical to more effective, long term and strategic communication management.

This paper tracks the development of a campaign mounted by WRATD to illustrate the fallacious perception that grassroots activism is confined to a crude and unsophisticated public relation’s role. It challenges the perception that public relations is the tool of large organizations and businesses and claims grassroots activism is setting new benchmarks in public relations practice. The case study also offers an opportunity to look at current perceptions of institutional legitimacy in policy and decision making in Victoria, Australia. It asserts perceptions of legitimacy are undergoing change and moving away from the dichotomy that has dominated thinking in both corporations and activism in the past.

Werribee Residents Against Toxic Dump (WRATD)

On the 13 November 1998 a giant ‘yahoo’ rang out over the western plains of Victoria as Werribee residents planned the biggest community party the city had ever seen, according to WRATD Chairperson, Joanne Ryan. The massive victory party celebrated the triumphant win over both the Kennett state government and corporate sugar and building supplier giant CSR, who had planned to install a ‘waste management precinct’ in Wests Road, Werribee. That day CSR announced it would drop its controversial plans and sell the quarry site it had earmarked as a ‘toxic dump’ to Wyndham City Council.

The City of Wyndham lies 40 km south-west of Melbourne with the major commercial and activity centre of Werribee and Hoppers Crossing at its nucleus. The region is a vast flat area that once supported important grasslands and a unique ecological system. Described by some as ‘barren plains’, this area escaped major residential development in the fifties and sixties. However proximity to Melbourne and the dream of home ownership has meant these areas now support growing populations of young residents who seek ‘quality of life’ for their families and an opportunity to forge new social groups based on optimistic community visions. The relative youth of the area is illustrated by the demographic breakdown where the population of Wyndham has only 11.3% of the population between 50 and 75+ years. The majority of residents are 17 and younger (37.6%), and between the ages of 25 and 49 years (38.7%). Wyndham’s population is projected to grow at a rate of 64% between 1999 and 2021, and is expected to have third fastest net increase in population of all LGAs (Local Government Areas) (Source: Wyndham City Council).
Definition of Issues

The proposed location of the toxic waste disposal facility was greeted with dismay by local Wyndham residents and business for a variety of reasons. As Van Moorst (1998) outlined in his article: The Proposed Werribee Toxic Dump and the Failure of Government, the issues for the community fell broadly into three areas:

- location and technology of the waste disposal facility;
- reputation of the proponent CSR;
- democracy and issues of transparency and disclosure on the part of the statutory authorities.

1 Location

Werribee is one of Melbourne’s fastest growing municipalities. It is a designated growth corridor and the quarry would be three kilometres from the nearest housing estate (van Moorst, p.28). Industry in the area includes the Western Treatment Plant, air bases at Laverton and Point Cook, as well as a major market garden horticultural industry. The perceived threat to the region’s $40 million vegetable industry came from concerns about toxins leaching through the clay and plastic liners of the toxic waste disposal facility and into the watertable. This also was perceived to have possible adverse effects on marine life in Port Phillip Bay and sensitive wetlands, which are home to many species of migratory birds only several hundred meters away from the proposed ‘dump’. Other issues include the release of odour and gases that could affect the health and wellbeing of residents, the determent of tourism ventures and disadvantage to the community by the lowering of house prices.

2 Reputation

The reputation of the proponent CSR and the nature of the technology used to build the proposed toxic waste disposal facility became a major focus for Wyndham residents. Clay and plastic liners proposed for the disposal facility were deemed to be inadequate and contained a risk of toxins leaching through into the watertable and contaminating the environment. The reputation of the proponent CSR as the company responsible for ground water contamination and numerous breaches of EPA guidelines at their timber processing plant at Dartmoor added to unease.
3 Democracy

Concerns about citizen’s rights and the duty by governments to consult with the community in planning and social matters were raised. Issues of transparency and disclosure in regard to planning processes resonated in the broader community and reignited concerns about citizen’s rights voiced when groups such as Save Albert Park had emerged several years earlier. Perceptions of the failure of ‘legitimate’ decision making institutions to protect the environment e.g. the state government, EPA and Environmental Effects Statements process, gave momentum to those who questioned the policy decision.

WRATD Beginnings

On 3 April 1995 a preliminary meeting of eight residents was held to consider the organization of a group to oppose the toxic waste disposal facility proposal. On 18 April Werribee Residents Against Toxic Dump (WRATD) was formed at a public meeting. At that same meeting another large public meeting was planned, a petition against ‘toxic dump’ was launched and by the following week a research report on toxic waste landfills, including evidence of risk and contamination was prepared to be presented to CSR. In the ensuing three years the breadth and scope of WRATD’s campaign was impressive by any standards. In his book Managing Public Relations, Grunig defines a public as a “group of people who: 1. Face a similar problem. 2. Recognise that the problem exists. 3. Organize to do something about the problem.” He also describes four categories of publics: nonpublics, latent, aware and active. For WRATD building community consciousness of the key issues in latent publics and the process of moving them in to the ‘aware’ publics category required specific tactics and strategies. These included media relations with local and metropolitan media channels, letter and newsletter production and delivery, petitions, face to face information meetings, advertising and signage, and public protests at CSR.

Short punchy key messages used repetition, rhythm and redundancy, including the ‘toxic dump’ was the Wrong technology, the Wrong location and the Wrong company, Dump the Dump,5 and Clean and Green - Not Toxic to ram home the message. A series of colourful stunts drew the media eye such as: the handing out of 100 lettuces at Parliament House, the wearing of gas masks by protestors, and the blockading of the proposed toxic waste disposal site by trucks, tractors, cars and human chains.

Stakeholders that were in the aware/active stage6 were directly lobbied, asked to write submissions boycott CSR and find alternative products, sign petitions, write letters, reports and develop research, sponsor activities and
donate funds. WRTAD published a report on CSR’s Environmental track record entitled *CSR: A History of Environmental Vandalism* to launch the boycott. Information kits for CSR company shareholders on the ‘toxic dump’ issue were developed as well as a separate information kit for school children (*The Age, 21/11/98*, p.10). Tactics were targeted specifically at all the diverse target public profiles and the ‘management’ of the communication process was evident.

**Agenda Setting**

WRTAD did not want to engage in a Not In My BackYard (NIMBY) campaign... and therefore commenced discussions with the EPA in mid 1996 (van Moorst, 1998, p.27).

WRATD sought to broaden the debate about the appropriateness of the toxic waste disposal facility and involve a number of ‘legitimate’ institutions such as the local council, the justice system, unions, other businesses and corporation and the federal government. It sought to crystallise the growing concern in the wider Victorian community that “the economic rationalist ideology driving the Kennett government... creates massive problems for local communities” (van Moorst, 1998, p.26).

People – media professionals, government officials, activist groups, private sector organizations, or the general public – begin to think an issue must be a problem because it is widely and thoroughly reported and discussed (Edelstein, 1993).

Newsworthiness is the result of some occurrence being discrepant from what people want to expect (war is newsworthy because people want peace). People want corporations to manufacture safe rather than unsafe products. In this vein, agendas result when the media report some set of events has occurred, noting the connection between (or allowing the audience to make the association) the event and what is desired or expected (Heath, 1997, p.273).

**Framing and Gaining ‘Legitimacy’**

The issue of ‘framing’ is a significant one for grassroots activist groups. The group’s battle to represent the dominant and therefore legitimate view of the situation is a critical one and often contested in the media arena. Against a political backdrop where activists had the potential to be ‘framed’ by the Kennett
state government as annoyed ‘not in my backyards’ or as a radical fringe group, (by implication NIMBY’s were ‘anti - Victorian, insular, narrow, subjective and irrational, ’fearing change itself’), WRATD sought to minimise the volatility of protests such as the picket line from fulfilling stereotypical views about protest and power.

Framing is more than a process of interpreting selected events; it is actually the process of creating events, of signifying, from the vast pool of daily occurrences, what is important. Struggles over framing decide which of the day’s many happenings will be awarded significance. Today the media have become critical arenas for this struggle, and social movements have increasingly focused on the medium since it plays such an influential role in assigning importance to issues facing the public. Gaining attention alone is not what a social movement wants; the real battle is over whose interpretation, whose framing of reality, gets the floor (Ryan, 1991, p.53).

In an incident where a WRATD member struggled with security guards to serve a writ on the state planning minister, Rob McColland, chairwoman of WRATD Joanne Ryan revealed her concern about the potential of this incident to determine media and public perceptions of the group.

It’s very unfortunate that we could now risk being seen as some kind of group of radical manics. We’re not,” she said. “We’re fighting for our community, we’re fighting for our economy, we’re fighting for our health (The Age, 5/7/98, p.9).

These issues were critical as they had the potential to endanger valuable support positions taken by corporate allies such as leading fast food chains who had recently claimed that they would have to review supply commitments if the waste landfill was built.

Dominant frames have ideological inertia on their side, i.e., they build on assumptions so taken for granted that mainstream media perceive them as the only logical approach to a situation (Ryan, 1991, p.68).

Examinations of the media reports of the period support the view that the Kennett government ‘framed’ WRATD as recalcitrant NIMBYs needing strong leadership and firm handling. In 1998, Acting Premier Pat McNamara warned CSR not to ‘buckle under community pressure” (The Age, 15/7/98, p.9). Hearing of the eventual back down by CSR, Premier Kennett said CSR “simply didn’t have the stomach for seeing it through.” (The Age, 22/11/98, p.24).

The challenger’s task, therefore, is to make visible the dominant frame, and then, prove that there is another equally “natural” way to perceive reality (Ryan, 1991, p.70).
The undertaking by activists to be perceived by the community, other public institutions and the media as reasonable and unified, was vital for their success. An example of one tactic designed to minimise media distortion was the *Picket Charter*. The *Picket Charter* was a contract between activist participants and the incorporated organization of WRTAD. This document, subtitled as a *Pledge of Behaviour for the Non-Violent Civil Disobedience Action* asked supporters to agree to the following conditions: no alcohol, illegal substances or weapons on the site (of a protest) at any time, children under the age of 15 to be the sole responsibility of their parents or legal guardians, no threatening or violent behaviour, and the pledge to treat all officials, other picketers, police with dignity and respect at all times. Supporters were asked to obey all directives issues by marshalls, and in the event of being arrested to offer only passive resistance.

Further to this the registration form asked for personal information from supporters including, name, address, contact numbers, as well as the nominated names and addresses of two people to be contacted in the event of arrest.

The success of this tactic in blurring the adversarial position in which activism is often represented, is evident by a comment by CSR’s general manager, recycling and waste management, Robert Reid, “Our opponents fought us and won but always they were reasonable people” (*The Age*, 11/21/98, p.10). The Age newspaper reported, “speaking with one voice has won them the support of the local council and this week they (WRATD) pushed their protest all the way to CSR’s boardroom. After an address from Werribee’s mayor at the company’s annual meeting in Sydney, the board agreed to consider the objections to the dump” (*The Age*, 07/17/98, p.6).

**Conclusion**

In this example of public relations a changed and distinct social, political and technological environment where corporations and activists now operate has been demonstrated. WRATD successfully achieved their objectives because they did not allow the fact that they were a reactive social movement prevent them from exploring sophisticated communication techniques to advance their position. CSR and the state government however were entrenched in their views that WRATD was the adversary and that their own status as large organizations gave all necessary ‘legitimacy’ required to meet their objectives. In doing so they fundamentally misunderstood where power was situated, in essence over estimating their own and underestimating WRATD.

This is a case study in which all scholars of communication can achieve greater understanding of the field. It introduces new ways of seeing issues of
power, legitimacy and change. It is of particular relevance to public relations educators and the advancement of public relations into greater spheres of influence that as an adjunct to the public relations industry. It is important not just for its definition of power, but the practical application of public relations techniques and applications. Public relations is an activity that is embedded in the communication between all organizations and their public. While specific branches of public relations such as corporate or government have particular characteristics in their application that define the field, grassroots or community activism also has unique aspects that define the area; and in this the WRATD campaign serves as an exemplar.

References


Notes

1 Ulrich Beck describes an environment in the late 20th Century where ‘industrial’ or ‘class society’ which, ‘revolved around the issue of how socially produced wealth could be distributed in a socially unequal and also ‘legitimate’ way; now “overlaps with new paradigm of risk society” (Beck, 1992, p.19).

2 Early in the 20th Century writers such as Tarde (1922) and LeBon (1925) “viewed activists as disrupting a systematic and well-managed society. This elitist notion arose from the belief that the best class deserved to rule without challenge. Activists were called rabble-rousers” (Heath, p155).

3 In the book *Managing Public Relations* (1984) Grunig and Hunt described four models of public relations, the press agentry/publicity model, the public information model, the two-way asymmetric model and the two way symmetric model.

4 One notable exception of this was the community activist campaign ‘the green bans’ that began with a grassroots resident’s group in 1971. The aim of this group was to preserve some of Sydney’s most historic buildings and remnant vegetation from ‘development’. The process was significantly bolstered by the support of NSW Builder’s Labourer’s Federation (BLF) bans on demolition. In a highly organised campaign the ‘green bans’, as opposed to ‘black bans’, were successful in achieving the preservation of many historic areas of Sydney and placing urban conservation firmly on the public agenda. But beyond this many will also remember the huge toll on the participants and the battle that was characterised by the adversarial position of the two parties which was characterised by violence.
and intimidation. Furthermore it was also a debate associated strongly with one central identity, Jack Mundey, and a political alignment with the left.

Common taxonomy of the issue quickly established the shorter and more memorable term ‘toxic dump’ rather than CSR’s classification of ‘prescribed waste landfill’

In *Managing Public Relations*, Grunig defines four categories of publics: nonpublics, latent, aware and active (p. 145)