Grassroots and Non-Profit Public Relations

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Abstract

By exploring the history of non-profit organizations and its deep influence on organizing society, one can see the direct influence of philanthropic endeavours upon a continually refining democracy such as ours. Through understanding how P.R. arose related to this field, a more thorough understanding of the operative capacity of nonprofit organizations can be drawn. In doing so, we may better understand the 'objective' qualities that define P.R. in this speciality and ways one may consider the resultant nuances upon their own attempts of effective communication for a community-oriented mission. The methodologies behind grassroots operations can thereby be extended into other disciplines and practices, cementing this realm of Public Relations as critical reality that must be valued as such for successful operation in public space. This paper explores Public Relations in nonprofit and grassroots organizations as found and defined within the United States of America.

Overview

Characterized by a sincere devotion towards addressing specific issues, nonprofit and grassroot organizations attempt to organize and construct respective communities around social involvement. In modern democracies, philanthropic ventures are crucial to economic growth and governance, all the while making sense of pluralistic societies through constructed associations. Operating as the 'third sector,' the presence of non profits is indicative of a "region's economic health, governmental efficiency, personal happiness, and faith in public institutions." (Leeper). As Bryson puts it, "Non-profit organizations often are called on to take up the slack in the system left by the departure of public organizations or services" (Bryson,74). In this dialogue of action set between organization and government to its citizenry, nonprofit entities prompt tangible change that would otherwise be impossible without these locally defined organizational structures and visions. Particularly in the United States, "Philanthropy is highly salient… because it is linked to such core values as religious freedom, opposition to powerful government, and individualism." (Kelly). The construction of publics and communities provide an important foundation for grassroots and non-profit organizations' operational spaces.

In contrast to a 'public,' a 'community' "can be conceptualized as a group of people who share a common experience, identity, or interest and who are joined together through their interaction or communication." (Hallahan). These community relations are as a result constructed and framed to make sense of social phenomena, thereby asserting the respective audience of a given non-profit. The now necessary role of organizations to both propose and contextualize the issues in which they operate "is often central to the survival of the nonprofit organization" (Neff). By creating their legitimacy by ownership of the issue they frame, it in turn increases awareness by the latent publics that are sought after.

Historical Development

The development of modern non-profit organizations traces its philosophical underpinnings to ancient times, though the importance set upon relationships and mutuality defining social fabric remains the same. Following the American Revolution, philanthropic groups arose as a confirmation, through voluntary association, of respective social classes that possessed dominion over a specific public. Owing support to the "public-spirited generosity of philanthropists who feel that contributions to the

commonwealth are spiritual or moral imperatives" (Robbins, 13), communities are constructed in terms of relations that organize existing social orders. Through continued industrialization "artisans and laborers began organizing mutual benefit associations to provide social insurance and assert their political and economic rights." (Hall, 38). Extreme examples of social reform through an organizational entity- such as the Oneida and Shaker communities- provide insight into the aspirations of a complete reorganization of society only possible when individuals *voluntarily* associated themselves. Andrew Carnegie's essay *An Employer's view of the Labor Question* supposes that the only way to protect dynamic capitalism is not through aimless giving by the social class provided by well-endowed means, but to create accessibility for the masses to accumulate this wealth on their own accord. (Hall). In this frame of accruing wealth and social benevolence, organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation, the Russell Sage FOundation, and the Ford Foundation established a channel for corporate and for-profit organizations to support the missions of nonprofit philanthropies.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the United States was placed into the role of global policy-maker, balancing this responsibility against its pluralistic voices of locality across the nation. Where vast accumulation of wealth by individuals that had existed in the industrial age were largely seen as inhibitors, sentiments of a uniform global citizenry benefitted this international sense of philanthropy: this period is where the concept of an institutional non-profit came to light. While the same guiding sentiments had long existed in American society, what defined post war organizations- such as the National Audubon Society, and the Sierra Club- was that these organizations "had no social dimension: members seldom if ever met face-to-face, individually or collectively. Membership became a political and financial act, not a social commitment." (Hall, 53). This contrasts the more active social roles of historical grassroots organizations, instead positing the nonprofit as a service. In a post-Fordism attitude on *the act* of giving, it does not matter the direction of one's action towards their public, so long as one is merely helping in a measurable form.

Since 1954 charitable organizations have been categorically sorted by the Internal Revenue Service on account of their charitable natures and classification with regards to their mission. As referred to in Section 501(c)(3) of IRS Code, organizations defined here are "serving religious, charitable, scientific, testing for public safety, literary, or educational purposes." (Kelly). This attempt to categorize

the actions of nonprofit organizations as related to their economic implications incentivizes individual action towards collective social efforts, albeit transactionally, where agency of the individual is best defined by their economic expenditure. From here onwards, associations "now enjoying the benefits of charitable tax-exempt status, increasingly became- if not extensions of government itself- an intrinsic part of the *organizational field* of public governance." (Hall, 53). As a response to the forms of a globa, neoliberal world, such a recategorization of grassroots philanthropy likens public interest to a defining act of locality.

The shifting acceptance of nonprofit organizations as community instigators reflects an active citizenry and their approach to local governance. Complacency to institutionalised organizations as the set 'way of doing' sets a self-destructive precedent upon philanthropic social networks. The tendency, on account of a benevolent organization's age, to not question and scrutinize it provides the potential for misconstrued 'help' in the name of its proposed cause. In terms of a lasting and effective exercise in healthy and mutual social communications, the supporting mission of good fails when done so in a condescending manner. As Ryan defines it, the phenomenon of 'liberal interventionism' is the doctrine that a state with the capacity to force liberal political institutions and social aspirations upon nonliberal states and societies is justified in doing so." (Ryan, 107) Particularly in the post-colonial West, citizens with expendable means who seek to genuinely better the lives of others must be aware of these historical examples of "benevolence" and the predisposition of change simply for the sake of change itself.

As a result, organizations that have historically strengthened their communities and participated well in their social work may now be ingenuine or callous in their approaches to philanthropy, seeing it as a transactional arrangement of social acts. This, arguably, is worse than not having the organization at all: good works are only as good as those *working* towards them. If community work becomes a side note or merely a 'task' relegated unto others, then it completely loses sight of its mission and turns the organization into a non-profit institution rather than a benevolent entity. Now, "More than at any time in the past, we all depend on people we have never seen, and they depend on us." (Nussbaum, 79). As the world becomes further connected and interdependent, the overlooked necessity to understand each group of peoples, ethnicities, and nationalities as a part of our role as global citizens may prompt people

to look towards their collective action as the greatest instigator of benevolent change for the benefit of everyone.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Non-Profit Organizations

Working with non-profit organizations provides a forum that is fulfilling to one's spiritual or emotional needs. Through devotion to community the capacity for change as possible through grassroots organizational structure mobilizes an amalgamatino of peoples in favor of a singular cause. The immediacy of a project, furthermore, is given proper attention as the organization of the task is put directly into the hands of the people themselves, independent of the legislative mechanism of government (Budrys, 2013). In meeting the specific demands and criterion of a localised project, the non-profit organization enables accountability and transparency with greater sincerity since one stakes their own involvement in these organizations and asserts a personal role. Involvement in such causes is a proactive rather than a reactive action. However, the disadvantages of non-profit organizations also lie in this reliance upon necessary contingencies. A great deal of time and resources for a non-profit organization are devoted towards garnering adequate publicity and funds through highly competitive beneficiaries. Grants and governmental cooperation must be considered in relation to the desired results of the work, and accordingly effective P.R. strategies must frame and contextualize the issue at hand in relation to their fund-raising realities.

Furthermore, the hierarchical organization of these project's authorities are, usually, complex and layered. A governing board of community members often provide the guiding ambitions towards how a set-out mission may be accomplished, with a managerial staff overseeing the reality of this operation. It is difficult to find a group of like-minded people with their professional skills, resources, and representation of the community able to form a coherent body. The consensus driven approach to constructing 'true' communities of totally shared aspirations are largely idealistic, and " such an approach to community is impossible in today's pluralistic society" (Hallahan). Those actively working on these projects are not always responsible for planning out thes vision, and must devote great time and effort to finding ways to *enable* these tasks. For those seeking gratifying fulfillment through helping others, the extent of participation versus planning these activities is limiting. The multiple layers of administration required to

lead impactful social work, particularly in those organizations that have wide-reaching scopes and audiences, may at times distract from direct channels of action. As the complexity of these bureaucracies increase, there is the reality that these governances may become self- referential entities that invest resources simply on the act of investing.

Unlike private businesses, nonprofit organizations are required to submit mission statements to the State and the IRS defining their goals as an entity operating under the law. There is a certain rigidity that arises from this framing, which may feel restrictive to those organizations aiming to be comprehensive in their scope. Additionally, these organizations are expected to compete for capital against large for-profit entities: since a non-profit is run by a board of directors, it cannot be operated within the same outlook of the market as a private business owner would.

Comparison to other PR Specialties

Similar to other P.R. specialties, non-profit organizations rely heavily on constructing the image of the public they serve as a means to foster relationships out of those constituencies. Like other professions, "Nonprofit organizations are permitted to lobby federal and state officials with communication on specific legislation and reflecting a view on that legislation. However, they are not permitted to participate in political campaigning." (Leeper). This statue ensures the vitality of grassroots action. Where other professions may use politicization as the means of generating profit for a company, the attempted lack thereof in nonprofits supposes the truthful reality of a core mission *independent* of temporary phenomena in the political landscape.

Practitioners act on behalf of their constituents to vy for dedicated resources and recognition by the government to enable their goals. Just as a private organization may attempt to sway their representative to advocate on their behalf, "NGO tactics also include lobbying to influence policy debates and government legislation as well as fund-raising efforts." (Page & Parnell, 361). Non-profit organizations require the same level of funding and recognition to act in the same sphere as private corporations. Cultivating relationships is paramount to the success of a non-profit; because of their philanthropic nature the mutuality with their outcome and community is measurable and fulfilling.

Critical Skills for Industry Success

To successfully operate in non-profit and grassroots organizations, one must borrow from a variety of other disciplines and skill sets. As these missions are far reaching and often overlap through collaborative efforts, effective communication skills of these underlying goals are paramount to the success of any project. A necessary long term commitment, vision, and self motivation / self-starter attitude (Rodriguez) are the most ideal qualities for those seeking to involve themselves in such work. Beyond the individual, those governing the organization itself must be a genuine reflection of the community in which they operate. A well-balanced and diverse board that reflects the constructed public, be it socio-economically, giving potential, or commitment expenditure must maintain active connection to the pluralistic communities that it serves.

Because of non-profit organizations' reality of operating in a profit-driven economy, one must be prepared to devote themself to their cause without expectation of equal economic sustenance. More than anything, this ability to be selflessly dedicated to a cause is the greatest metric of success regardless of the context, and is especially important in grassroots organizations. Regardless of the attempted scope of the mission, grassroots and nonprofit organizations demand consistent and effective PR operations for any form of success.

Prospects for The Future

Depending on the breadth of an organization- specifically, proportional to the functions of a local government- their prospects may greatly increase to fill the void of social responsibility. Publics have their greatest agency when their organization is acting to represent their shared identities, so this bypass of a ‘bureaucratic’ organization of power emboldens individuals to apply specific focus to core areas of attention. Contributing an estimated $1.047.2 trillion to the US economy in 2016 (NCCS), nonprofits are a critical part of the nation’s socioeconomic realms. Between 2006 and 2016, the number of registered nonprofit organizations increased by 4.5 percent and the amount of 501(c)(3) charities increased almost 20%(NCCS). If anything these numbers are under-representative of the real amount of nonprofits and

grassroots movements throughout the United States as not all religious organizations and charities seek registration. While global events such as recession and pandemic may temporarily dampen the growth of this sector, reliable growth over larger sample-periods suggest both an active and stable industry afforded by non-profit organizations.

Personal Interest

Consider Architecture as a communicative medium. It is not just buildings or art that make a building, it is a construction of constituencies and publics as defined by an Architectural project that connects it to a broader understanding of its users. Effective communication is the single most important factor to any individual seeking change in their world. Storytelling is a skill that I continually strive to improve for myself, and I am always cognizant of its unique capacity of framing the world as we experience it to other individuals. The philosophy of a mutually beneficial relationship with an organization and its constructed publics is ripe with potential for effective and direct change in a community. Architecture subscribes to this reality and operates as an all encompassing entity, yet as a collective society, we relegate it as a secondary or additive service. The humanity and artform of storytelling that is so often lost makes the world not only impersonal, but inhibits the communicative ability of peoples through their environments. I see the model posited by non-profit organizations and their effective PR as one that I can follow in my own pursuit of Architecture. The importance of grassroots organization and nonprofit entities are paramount to a healthy social fabric, and the lessons they posit can be thoughtfully expressed through respective Architectures. There is a more human- and as a result more beneficial-aspect to a long-term goal when we can envision ourselves in the project and see it as it applies to us. Through architecture I hope to reconnect people with their environments and foster a healthy and personable community for all, regardless of what public they may come from.

On top of critical design practice, I hope to establish an entity that outlines these grassroots and philanthropic visions for the benefit of everyone to let people realize their agency on account of effective self-organization. I am interested in not-for-profit and philanthropic work not as an additive service, but as an intrinsic quality of the work I may produce later in life. Everyone should desire to better your circumstances than how you were provided to you should be inherent to every individual; only though

active recognition of the historical and economical operating space that these goals are enabled can one begin to affect lasting change on their world.

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