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Fighting for funding: Values advocacy and Planned Parenthood's right-to-life



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ABSTRACT

This study employs a rhetorical analysis of Planned Parenthood's rhetoric in response to the crisis emerging from the release of controversial videos by the Center for Medical Progress. Using Bostdorff and Vibbert's concept of values advocacy and Heath's discussion of external rhetoric, we examine how Planned Parenthood appeals to core American values through social media in order to enhance its image and reinforce its legitimacy. The values of truth, health, agency, education, unity, and equality are ubiquitous throughout Planned Parenthood's strategic communication with the public. This research contributes to ongoing academic discussions of the theoretical and practical implications of external rhetoric, values advocacy, and legitimacy in public relations.

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1. Introduction

On July 14, 2015, the Center for Medical Progress released the first of a series of videos depicting Planned Parenthood allegedly profiting from the donation of fetal tissue. The video, which was close to two hours in length, portrayed a Planned Parenthood official callously discussing how to abort a fetus while preserving its organs for medical research to two anti-abortion activists posing as scientists (Somashekhhar & Paquette, 2015). In the following months, ten other videos were released in an effort to demonstrate Planned Parenthood engaging in illegal activity regarding the donation of fetal tissue. In August, a private research company concluded that the videos were deceptively edited and did not “present a complete or accurate record of the events they purport to depict” (Calmes, 2015).

Furthermore, a court in Texas handling the legal case threw out charges against Planned Parenthood and, in fact, decided to indict two individuals from the Center for Medical Progress for illegal activities (Fernandez, 2016). There is clearly a forensic aspect to this crisis centered on the legality of Planned Parenthood's actions, but public opinion is not always consistent with court rulings. Planned Parenthood faces the daunting task of winning the battle for public opinion. Though many have investigated the veracity of the Center for Medical Progress' claims, the objective of the current study is to examine the strategic response Planned Parenthood employed on social media to defend itself and appeal for public support.

Despite being declared deceptive and fallacious, the videos provided a platform for pro-life advocates to call for the investigation and subsequent defunding of Planned Parenthood, which currently receives more than \$500 million dollars from the federal government annually. The resulting congressional investigation placed Planned Parenthood at the heart

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of a long-standing debate between pro-life and pro-choice advocates regarding the right-to-life. What's more, the crisis threatened the very existence of the organization by placing its government funding at risk; funding that provides testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, contraception, and cancer screening and prevention, such as pap smears and breast exams (Planned Parenthood, 2014).

The crisis ignited by the Center for Medical Progress, and the threat it placed on Planned Parenthood's legitimacy as an organization, offers a valuable opportunity to examine how Planned Parenthood participates in and responds to discourses external to the organization. Specifically, this study demonstrates how Planned Parenthood engages in external rhetoric to appeal to common values it shares with its publics in order to defend its legitimacy as an organization. External rhetoric, according to Heath (2011), is the process of "how organizations engage in discourse to co-create reality with external publics needed to align interests" (p. 417). In the paragraphs that follow, we demonstrate how Planned Parenthood engages in external rhetoric that is value-laden in order to position itself as a valuable member of the community, working for the betterment of society as a whole.

2. Advocacy and rhetoric

Values advocacy, first explicated by Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994), draws attention to the ways in which organizations may appeal to audiences on the basis of shared values; in turn, public audiences take into consideration those shared values when evaluating organizational messages. Although values advocacy in its original form places the primary focus on how organizations appeal to shared values, we address the relationship between fact and value in the dialogue created by Planned Parenthood by demonstrating how facts are often used in exhibiting shared values and positioning the organization as a productive member of society. Facts and values are impossible to disentangle (Putnam, 2002), and in discussing how Planned Parenthood appeals to the values of its various publics, we highlight the ways in which issues of both fact and value are central to the organization's rhetoric in response to this crisis.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine Planned Parenthood's social media use via Twitter over the course of three months following the initial release of the video by the Center for Medical Progress. Using a rhetorical approach, we examine the ways in which the organization engages in value-laden discourse with its publics in order to defend its legitimacy as an institution. We begin with a discussion of legitimacy and values advocacy, highlight the ways in which Planned Parenthood engaged in values advocacy to defend its legitimacy as an organization, and, finally, address implications for furthering the study of external organizational rhetoric in public relations practice.

2.1. Institutional legitimacy

Weber (1978) suggested that legitimacy arises from conformity with rules that represent general social norms and formal laws. In an organizational context, legitimacy results when an organization is in congruence with social axioms (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Deephouse (1996) advances these definitions when he argues that an organization is legitimate if its values and actions align with the expectations and values of various social actors. These actors can include, but are not limited to, government regulators, stakeholders, the media, or public opinion, which serves to set and maintain standards of acceptability (Deephouse, 1996; Meyer & Scott, 1983).

Legitimacy is often discussed as the presence or absence of questioning. Hirsch and Andrews (1984) advance this idea when they discuss performance and value challenges. Performance challenges emerge when an existing organization fails to execute its purpose and its performance with regard to meeting the goals of its mission is called into question. Value challenges function differently in that the organization's mission and reason for existence is questioned, regardless of its ability to fulfill particular goals (Hirsch & Andrews, 1984). In a similar vein, Knoke (1985) discusses legitimacy as the public's acceptance of an organization's right to carry out its affairs as it chooses.

There are *dimensions* of legitimacy that have been advanced in recent years. Namely, Aldrich and Fiol (1994) distinguish between two types of legitimacy: *cognitive* and *sociopolitical*. Cognitive legitimacy focuses on the categorization of an organization as belonging to a certain form, or as performing actions that are seemingly "taken for granted," because the public is a knowledgeable user of a particular product or service. Sociopolitical legitimacy refers to whether or not key stakeholders and the general public accept a venture as "right" or acceptable given social norms. Assessing public acceptance of an industry is one way of determining sociopolitical legitimacy. Unlike cognitive legitimacy, sociopolitical legitimacy deals with observed features of an organization and whether or not they should be deemed as socially acceptable (Bitektine, 2011). Suchman (1995) proposed a similar concept when he put forth the label "moral legitimacy" to describe judgments made about whether or not a particular activity is the "right thing to do" (p. 579). If the organization's actions and the beliefs of the public do not align, a threat to organizational legitimacy exists (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975).

Legitimacy is important because it serves to insulate the organization from external pressures and protect its conduct from being questioned (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). An organization's chance of survival is improved when it demonstrates conformity to the norms and social expectations of its environment, ensuring greater stability, protection from scrutiny, and access to resources (Baum & Oliver, 1991; Deephouse & Carter, 2005). According to Dowling and Pfeffer (1975), an organization can achieve legitimacy in three ways. The first involves adapting organizational outputs, goals, and methods of operation to conform to existing structures that have been deemed legitimate. Second, through communication, the

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