

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Public Relations Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pubrev

Full Length Article

Beyond organization-centred public relations: Collective action through a civic crowdfunding campaign

Mai Anh Doan*, Margalit Toledano

Waikato Management School, The University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, 3240, New Zealand

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Civic crowdfunding
Collective action
Activism
Organization-centered PR

ABSTRACT

Public relations scholars have called for a shift from organization-centred approaches and practices to community, – or collective-based ones. With the Internet, the latter have become more frequent although under-researched or not well understood. This article addresses those gaps by researching a community-based campaign in New Zealand and by underpinning the research with collective action theory. Methodologically, it combines netnography, thematic analysis, and interviews with major players, to analyze a civic crowdfunding campaign. It provides an account of how two amateur activists not only initiated and managed this campaign, but also raised US\$1.5 million (NZ\$2.27) within three weeks to buy a private beach and gift it back to the New Zealand public. The article seeks to add to both PR scholarship and practice. It adds to the former by analysing the campaign and identifying success factors for civic crowdfunding campaigns more generally; and to the latter by accounting for a different kind of activist and community-based PR that goes beyond organization-centred approaches to offer gratifying community-centered work that improves the reputation of PR for contributing to the common good.

1. Introduction

This article analyzes the January – February 2016 Awaroa/Abel Tasman beach campaign in New Zealand. The campaign attracted international media attention when it succeeded in raising money to buy what was then a private beach in order to open it to perpetual public access. In the words of the campaign, its aim was to keep the beach “permanently off the property market and in the hands of all future generations of New Zealanders and visitors.” The aim was eventually taken up by almost 40,000 individuals, groups and institutions through the civic crowdfunding platform Givealittle.co.nz ([Givealittle Able Tasman beach, 2016](#)). The campaign raised NZ\$2,278,171.09 within 25 days. The success was unprecedented not only in the scale and variety of its communal operation, but also in benefiting the most people and, probably, raising the largest civic crowdfunded amount to date.

As a nation that went through neo-liberal reforms in the late 1980s and 90s, New Zealand’s case might shed light on other nations’ experiences in community action and fundraising. The selling of state-owned assets, and the scrapping of state control over wages, prices, rents etc., resulted in high income inequality and poverty that did not match New Zealanders’ previous egalitarian values. Historically, New Zealand’s “fundraising was informed by transnational precedents, but was also shaped by the early co-existence of state and voluntary welfare, and by its elaboration in a small-scale, egalitarian society” ([Tennant, 2013, p. 47](#)). This article investigates current community activists and donors’ motivations and identifies both the deeply rooted expectation for fairness, and the opposition to private ownership of a pristine beach, as major factors that enlisted masses of New Zealanders to participate in the huge

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: maianhdoan@hotmail.com (M.A. Doan), margalit.toledano@waikato.ac.nz (M. Toledano).<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.10.001>

Received 31 January 2017; Received in revised form 30 August 2017; Accepted 7 October 2017

0363-8111/ © 2017 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

civic crowdfunding campaign.

The article suggests that the campaign addresses a promising but neglected intersection in the PR literature, namely, the integration of online crowdfunding, collective action, and community activism. Crowdfunding, as a digital form of the PR function of fundraising, deals and communicates with community, a foundational concept in PR; collective action explains human action in producing and achieving common goals; and activism tackles social issues. Combined together, they help PR scholars and practitioners understand how to mobilise financial and non-financial resources beyond organizational boundaries and contribute to society. As the campaign illustrates, individuals as well as PR practitioners can use crowdfunding as a tool that enables a shift from organizational goals to a focus on the promotion of social causes and to leading a fully functioning society (Heath, 2006).

The PR literature has paid little attention to the practice of crowdfunding in general and has not drawn lessons from recent developments in civic crowdfunding in particular. Neither has it incorporated collective action theory both to inspire studies of relevant PR practices and to provide significant insights in relation to activism. This article seeks to contribute to the field by looking at both topics in the light of PR practice and scholarship.

This article analyzes the factors that made the campaign successful and goes on to examine how civic crowdfunding could be used for pro-social activism and could be developed as a PR practice contributing to a fully functioning society. It suggests that civic crowdfunding is a great technological platform for resource-limited activists to gain more capabilities. It provides opportunities for PR practitioners to use and extend their skills as boundary spanners and fulfil their role as the go-between organizations and society who can contribute to the common good.

2. Literature review

2.1. Civic crowdfunding overview

Crowdfunding is a generic term describing “an increasingly widespread form of fundraising, typically via the Internet, whereby groups of people pool money, usually (very) small individual contributions, to support a particular goal” (Ahlers, Cumming, Günther, & Schweizer, 2015, p. 955). By this definition, crowdfunding differs from fundraising in that it happens online and attracts smaller contributions from anyone with an Internet connection. People can donate financial and non-financial resources depending on the type of crowdfunding campaign.

Different types of crowdfunding are emerging and these include donation-based, reward-based, equity and lending (Mollick, 2014). The sub-genre called civic crowdfunding used in the New Zealand campaign was first conducted offline over a century ago. That was the famous example of the 1884 campaign to complete the pedestal of the New York Statue of Liberty that was organized by Pulitzer, the publisher of the New York World newspaper. Pulitzer used his newspaper to publish a public appeal to urge New Yorkers to contribute and managed to collect the US\$102,000 necessary to finish the project (Freedman & Nutting, 2015).

Civic crowdfunding is a sub-genre of crowdfunding where various stakeholders, including individuals, organizations and government agencies, come together to provide a community service or property (Davies, 2015; Stiver et al., 2015). Unlike other types of crowdfunding such as reward-based crowdfunding where funders often receive a tangible reward for their contribution, or equity-based and lending crowdfunding, where investors receive financial rewards, civic crowdfunding contributors come together to provide finance for a community service or property that “can be consumed equally by members of a community, regardless of their contribution” (Davies, 2015, p. 343). By those criteria, civic crowdfunding could be considered a collective action (Davies, 2014). Since its re-birth and exponential development a decade ago, there has not been much research on civic crowdfunding. Davies (2015) even argued that civic crowdfunding is an area “yet to be defined by academic researchers” (p.343).

2.2. Collective action and public relations

Collective action is a group theory investigating “actions undertaken by individuals or groups for a collective purpose” (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002, p. 290). The outcome of this collective endeavour is to create common goods and has such distinguishable features as non-exclusivity (i.e., enjoyed by all members regardless of their level of contribution to the common goods) and non-rivalry (the consumption of one member does not affect others) (Olsen, 1971). Collective action theory has long been used to explain various phenomenon in economics (i.e., Olsen, 1971), sociology (i.e., Marwell & Oliver, 1993), political studies (i.e., Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014) and other fields (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Fulk, Heino, Flanagin, Monge, & Bar, 2004) but has very limited visibility in PR studies.

All collective actions, according to Bimber et al. (2005), work on three basic conditions: (i) the ability to identify people with relevant interest and resource, (ii) the ability to communicate the message among members, and (iii) the ability to coordinate, integrate or synchronize members’ contribution. This communicative approach to collective action is highly relevant for PR scholarship that discusses groups under different terms such as publics and communities (see, for example, Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Grunig J.E., 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Hallahan, 2004; Hallahan, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 2002). The PR discussions, while having contributed to the advancement of the body of knowledge, often treated groups (or publics, or communities) in relation to organizations. Collective action theory, on the other hand, can exist outside of the traditional organizational boundaries and can be more inclusive of other interest groups, cause-related advocacy communities and social movements (Schumann, 2015).

With the emergence of Internet-based technologies such as social media or crowdfunding platforms, collective action has become even more “theoretically and empirically intriguing” (Bimber et al., 2005, p. 365). The Internet enables self-organizing groups to emerge and meet the three collective action functions in relatively low cost and short time. It undertakes crowd-enabled collective

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6575862>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6575862>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)